

# **On Nothing**

## **A Kristevan Reading of Trauma, Abjection and Representation**

**By**

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**Submitted in accordance with the requirements for the  
degree of Ph.D.**

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**September 2004**

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## Acknowledgements

Firstly, I would like to thank my family for their emotional, financial and intellectual support; without their generosity this project would not have been possible. The origins of this thesis can be traced to my time as a student on a course about trauma and memory which was taught by Griselda Pollock, who would later agree to become my supervisor for this work. I am deeply grateful to her for giving me the opportunity to undertake this research. Over the past four years she has been selfless in her guidance and encouragement. She continues to be a source of intellectual inspiration. I would also like to expressly thank Mieke Bal, Barbara Engh, John Mowitt, Peter Nix and Jacqueline Rose for specific instances of advice, praise and support.

There are many to whom I owe a debt of intellectual gratitude, amongst them, Paul Bowman, Diana Douglas, Frank Felsenstein, Tony Hughes, Vivien Jones, Martin McQuillan, Fred Orton, Eric Prenowitz, Will Rea, Adrian Rifkin, Alison Rowley and Marquard Smith. I would also like to thank, in particular, the past editors of *parallax* who recommended that I serve a stint as co-editor of the journal. The opportunity this gave me to put together a special issue on the theme of witnessing was immensely helpful for this thesis. Kurt 'Kurteous' Hirtler, Ola Stahl, Marcel Swiboda and Ika Willis, I am deeply grateful to you all. It was also a privilege to work with my co-editors Rowan Bailey and Peter Kilroy. I am highly appreciative of the fortitude and kindness shown to me by those with whom I lived in shared accommodation whilst writing the thesis. Katrin Kivimaa and Alistair 'Blue' Rider aka (Minim)Al, I will greatly miss our after-dinner discussions although not the copious quantities of bulgar rice which preceded them. Thanks must also go to the staff at the Inter-Library Loans Service at the Brotherton Library; who are a model of efficiency, and to the School of Fine Art office.

To those good friends from my time in Leeds – Jim Akroyd, Michael Bostock, Andy Black, Tim Cutler, Rob Dixon, Chris Fagan, David Fox, Justin Ions, Jesus the Librarian, Karima Laachmir, Rhiannon Lawrence-Francis (particularly for the proof reading), Sophie Mathieson (a special thank you for giving me a computer), Alan Murungi, Josine Opmeer, Sichart Ratanarat, Annette Siedel-Arpaci and Dominic 'Dombo' Williams (especially for the proof-reading) – I thank you all. Also, to those who made life bearable for the two years I spent working in a call centre to pay for this thesis – Tasadiq Bashir, Adam Caschetto, Sian Davies, Timurjin Hassan, Sapna Kumari, Kerry Littlejohn, Asif Malavia, Michelle Porter, Liza Rafferty, Joanne Reather, Ben Small and Adam 'Wendy House' Williams – respect.

To old friends from galaxies far, far way – Nicolas Barnett, Alex Fitzgerald, Sally Hermon, Justin 'Paddy' Linger, James Overstall, Robert Sibson, Andrew 'Smithy' Smith, Justin Vieregge and Jason West – heartfelt gratitude for the many good memories. And finally, my deepest thanks to Carol whose kindness knows no bounds. You gave me the strength to begin this project and it is to you that it is dedicated.



## Abstract

This doctorate provides a critical reassessment of Julia Kristeva's work on abjection, focusing on the abject as a form of writing. It brings Kristeva's work on abjection into dialogue with the writings of Louis-Ferdinand Céline, Paul Celan and Charlotte Delbo, the music of Diamanda Galás, the paintings of Francis Bacon, and a series of photographs taken by the *Sonderkommando* at Auschwitz. The overarching argument of the thesis is that these different mediums access the realm of the abject in distinct and effective ways. Centrally, I argue that Céline writes 'towards,' Celan from 'within' and Delbo 'back from' this realm. I begin the thesis with a consideration of the ethical ramifications accompanying Kristeva's decision to use the works of Céline as the primary exemplar of writing as a process of abjection. The chapter includes an engagement with Céline's anti-Semitic pamphlets. It also compares the work of Céline and Jean-Paul Sartre in terms of the sexual economy of their writing. In my second chapter, I argue for understanding the abject as a kind of noise that exists as the underside to language. I track the way noise manifests itself in language through detailed readings of works by Bacon, Galás and Celan. The third chapter explores Delbo's conception of anamnesis, drawing particularly on the works of Didier Anzieu and Brian Massumi to think through the notion of the 'skin of memory'. I make a case for understanding Delbo's prose as a conduit for sensation as well as a mode of description. In my conclusion I consider the status of four photographs taken by a member of the *Sonderkommando* at Auschwitz as a form of bearing witness to atrocity. I argue that these images can be understood as a visual correlative to the writings of Celan and Delbo.

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## Introduction

### Finding a Way in Language

*Thinking definitely means getting words to appreciate one another, means secretly fostering their encounters.<sup>1</sup>*

This is a thesis about writing. It works towards readings of a set of writings (both literary and visual) produced in response to traumatic events. These events are often conceived of as beyond description, as productive of a crisis in testimony. The poetry of Paul Celan, the poetic prose of Charlotte Delbo<sup>2</sup>, and the four photographs taken by a member of the *Sonderkommando* at Auschwitz, are all attempts to bear witness to the Holocaust. Each of them endeavours to write the horror through the use of words or of light. Theirs is a language that strives to emerge out of the horror.

In trying to write about this writing of the crisis – a writing written from within a crisis in writing – I have sought, at times, to reduce my critical engagement with the ideas of others. This thesis is not a commentary upon commentary; it is a piece of writing about writing. It is therefore not a straightforward work of literary or visual criticism. Any interest displayed in thematics, in imagery and metaphor, in meter, whilst not incidental, is less important than the *way* that this interest is articulated. I am obviously not trying to write as Delbo or as Celan but I am also deliberately making an effort not to write over them or through them but instead towards them. This aspiration to avoid doing violence to the object of study also informs the theoretical underpinning of the thesis, which could broadly be said to be Kristevan. Whilst I do offer exegeses of aspects of Julia Kristeva's thinking it is my own belief that much commentary is, of necessity, 'outside' theory. In such commentary the theory is explained and then applied in what might be called the cut

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<sup>1</sup> Edmond Jabès, *The Book of Resemblances 3: The Ineffaceable · The Unperceived*, Trans. Rosmarie Waldrop, (Hanover: Wesleyan University Press, 1992), p.55.

<sup>2</sup> Delbo is a writer who has received relatively surprisingly little critical attention in Anglo-American writing on Holocaust Literature. I hope my thesis will play a small part in rectifying this neglect. To my knowledge there is only one book devoted exclusively to Delbo's writings, Nicole Thatcher's *A Literary Analysis of Charlotte Delbo's Concentration Camp Re-Presentation*, (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press, 2000). Lawrence Langer uses Delbo's distinction between common and deep memory as a kind of theoretical template in his well known work *Holocaust Testimonies: The Ruins of Memory* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), see particularly pp.3-9. He provides a literary analysis of Delbo's trilogy in his earlier work *The Age of Atrocity: Death in Modern Literature*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1978). There is also a chapter on Delbo in Michael Rothberg's *Traumatic Realism: The Demands of Holocaust Representation*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), pp.141-177.



and paste approach. This is a working practice which I have sought to avoid, attempting instead to illustrate the theory inside the writing. For example, I have sought to explain the insights a Kristevan understanding of language can bring to any effort to comprehend the literary projects of Celan and Delbo as much through a performative illustration as by simple explanation.

In his essay ‘Julia Kristeva and her histories,’ Adrian Rifkin writes of the tendency to pillage Kristeva’s texts for ‘conveniently sized “bleeding chunks” of theory, as is the fate suffered by the much abused concept of abjection’.<sup>3</sup> This thesis might be read as an attempt to return the spoils of theory – the concept of abjection – to its original situation. I seek to provide a critical reassessment of abjection through a sustained engagement with Kristeva’s *Powers of Horror*. My opening chapter considers the often neglected final third of *Powers of Horror*. This relatively ignored section of Kristeva’s text constitutes an analysis of the writings of Louis-Ferdinand Céline, focusing specifically on the ways in which his writings manage the abject. In secular society, writing provides ‘the ultimate sublimation of the unsignifiable’.<sup>4</sup> We are all haunted by that *no thing* out of which we became, a *no thing* which cannot be known, which ‘lies there, quite close’ but ‘cannot be assimilated’.<sup>5</sup> In the absence of religion – with its ‘various means of purifying the abject’<sup>6</sup> – literature acts as ‘an unveiling of the abject: an elaboration, a discharge’.<sup>7</sup> Through its capacity to expel the abject, literature shores us against our ruin. The link between abjection and literature which Kristeva develops, the way in which the abject appears in language, is often downplayed. Readers have, instead, tended to pick up on and develop Kristeva’s descriptions of the physical, visceral manifestations of the abject.<sup>8</sup> In this thesis I want to place greater emphasis on Kristeva’s ideas about the connections between writing and abjection. I will consider whether it is

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<sup>3</sup> Adrian Rifkin, ‘Julia Kristeva and her histories,’ in *parallax* 8, 4:3 (July-September 1998), p.136.

<sup>4</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, Trans. Leon S. Roudiez, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), p.23.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid. p.1.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. p.17.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid. p.208.

<sup>8</sup> Barbara Creed’s work on film and the monstrous feminine epitomizes this kind of approach. See Creed, *The Monstrous Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis*, (Routledge: London, 1993). More recently Sarah Ahmed continues this trend, privileging abjection’s somatic dimension, whilst ignoring the relationship between language and the abject which Kristeva develops at length in *Powers of Horror*. In Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004), pp.86-88.



possible to think of writings about horror as writings out of horror. Theodor W. Adorno famously suggested that '*to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric*'. All literature that endeavours to bear witness to atrocity does so at the risk of being beautiful. It threatens to cause the reader pleasure. Words also *mean* things, whereas what the words describe, the actual events; were, perhaps, felt to be beyond meaning. I will argue that Celan and Delbo write against meaning, they write towards non-sense. Their language is abject rather than beautiful. It is only through this abject language that something of the horror can be carried to the reader. This language enables a glimpse of this horror to be attained in the everyday. It is a horror that cannot be communicated by a language which privileges the symbolic. It can only be 'communicated' by accentuating the semiotic element; it can only be communicated through the non-communicative.

The abject writer whom Kristeva chooses to focus upon in *Powers of Horror*, Céline was, however, a fascist, a misogynist and a rabid anti-Semite. My first chapter therefore considers the ethical implications of Kristeva's decision to mark out Céline as the writer of abjection *par excellence*. For Kristeva, Céline's writing gives us '*the most daring X-ray of the "drive-foundations" of fascism*'.<sup>9</sup> If the powers of horror that constitute abjection are not cathexed through literature or religion then they may be expelled through violence. It is these impulses which were harnessed by National Socialism. Céline writes on the cusp of these impulses whereas I will argue that both Celan and Delbo write out of the devastation wrought by their discharge. Céline writes himself out of language whilst Celan and Delbo must write their way back to language. They have been forced to occupy an '*exorbitant outside or inside, ejected beyond the scope of the possible, the tolerable, the thinkable*'.<sup>10</sup> My second and third chapters explore the efforts of these two authors to rethink writing and, in so doing, to bring the intolerable into language. I will argue that Celan and Delbo do not write away the horror but write from within it. In the thesis I have chosen to describe this horror in a variety of ways, at times calling it abjection, noise, nothingness and shapelessness.<sup>11</sup> This should not be perceived as indecision on my part but may rather be understood as a

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<sup>9</sup> Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, p.155.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. p.1.

manifestation of the difficulty of writing the horror (as distinct from writing *about* it). This horror is always presumed, but never *known* as such. I use a combination of metaphors in my efforts to find a way in language to open the reader to a thinking of the thinking of a *no thing* beyond the signifying process. Celan and Delbo break the pellicle of language – the symbolic skin – they wound words to enable some of the horror to surface. The words are made to mean less, to unmean. Cathy Caruth writes in *Unclaimed Experience* that what returns to haunt the victim of trauma is ‘*not only the reality of the violent event but also the reality of the way that its violence has not yet been fully known*’.<sup>12</sup> This horror can never be known, but I will argue that it can be *shown*.<sup>13</sup> In a famous passage, the psychoanalyst Dori Laub put forward the argument that the Holocaust is an ‘event without a witness’.<sup>14</sup> He describes how, because of the conditions within the camps, the subject broke down: ‘*the Holocaust created...a world in which one could not bear witness to oneself*’.<sup>15</sup> Laub is only one of many thinkers who have sought to elaborate the difficulties that inhere in efforts to bear witness to traumatic events. Here I will briefly explore two other attempts to theorize the problem of attesting to horror, those of Lawrence Langer and Edith Wyschogrod. This will help to foreground some of the issues that this thesis seeks to address. In *Holocaust Testimonies*, Lawrence Langer explores the value of video-testimony as a means of bearing witness. Langer understands spoken testimony to be less mediated – more immediate – than literary accounts of the Holocaust. Holocaust literature is stylized. Through this stylization it closes the gap between the unfamiliar world of the camps and the familiarity of the present. Langer writes that ‘*written memoirs, by the very strategies available to their authors – style, chronology, analogy, imagery, dialogue, a sense of character, a coherent moral vision – strive to narrow this space, easing us into their unfamiliar world through familiar (and*

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<sup>11</sup> The status of ‘nothing’ in the thesis requires clarification. The word is used constantly in everyday language with reflection. In the context of this work *nothing*, however, is not null but instead describes a disturbing *something*, a matter that refuses to be pulled into the shape that is any and all signification.

<sup>12</sup> Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, History*, (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1996), p.6.

<sup>13</sup> I mean ‘shown’ in the sense that Kristeva uses it in the opening chapter of *Powers of Horror*. There Kristeva describes how the corpse *shows* rather than *signifies* death. To *show* is to present the reader/spectator with unmediated horror. See Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, p.3.

<sup>14</sup> Dori Laub, ‘An Event without a Witness: Truth, Testimony and Survival,’ in Shoshana Felman & Dori Laub, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*, (London: Routledge, 1992), pp.75-92.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.* p.82.



hence comforting?) literary devices'.<sup>16</sup> Writing involves 'the conscious choice of phrasing one's words'.<sup>17</sup> Video testimony is less reflexive and hence less mediated. Mediation opens gaps between the experience of the event and efforts to articulate that experience. Langer wants to bridge these gaps. *Holocaust Testimonies* explicitly sets out 'to undo a negation – the principle of discontinuity which argues that an impassable chasm permanently separates the seriously interested auditor and observer from the experiences of the former Holocaust victim'.<sup>18</sup> The notion of unsayability, the belief that the experience cannot be preserved and communicated through speech, is not countenanced. The addressee may, however, institute a self-created gap as a form of protection against the recounting of the event.<sup>19</sup>

During the discussion of what he terms 'humiliated memory,' Langer recognizes the problem of translation that exists for the survivor. He suggests that at times memory exists as content without a form.<sup>20</sup> Memory can sometimes exist as a *differend* for which there is not an adequate idiom, as an experience for which words are found wanting.<sup>21</sup> The words that do exist cannot carry the feelings. The phrase cannot be followed. This intimates that there is an element of unsayability to the event. The language of the present is informed by contemporary value systems which make it impossible for the survivor to 'establish meaning through analogy'.<sup>22</sup> To achieve the requisite analogical potential would require revising the languages of history and moral philosophy.<sup>23</sup> Langer's work prefigures that of Giorgio Agamben in *Remnants of Auschwitz* in that it acknowledges the insufficiency of contemporary moral language for giving an account of Auschwitz.<sup>24</sup> *Holocaust Testimonies* concedes that the task of reformulating moral language may be an impossible one. It opens up the possibility of a break between the world of the camps and the present and, by extension, between the inhuman and the human.

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<sup>16</sup> Lawrence L. Langer, *Holocaust Testimonies*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), p.19.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid. p.129.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid. p.xiv.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid. p.82.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid. p.113.

<sup>21</sup> Here I am drawing on Jean-François Lyotard's notion of the *differend*. See Lyotard, *The Differend*, Trans. Georges van den Abbeele, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988).

<sup>22</sup> Langer, *Holocaust Testimonies*, p.113.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid. p.120.

<sup>24</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive*, Trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen, (New York: Zone Books, 1999).



Langer's understanding of witnessing, however, resides almost exclusively on the side of meaning. For him, memory resides in the sense of the words not in their mode of delivery. It is what is said rather than how it is said that is of prime importance. Towards the end of *Holocaust Testimonies*, Langer does acknowledge the '*manner of presentation*' of Holocaust testimony in addition to its content but in his accounts of testimony throughout the book he is attentive to sense at the expense of non-sense.<sup>25</sup> He is less interested in the gaps and rhythms of the testimonies than in their words. The silences, the stutters, the slowing and speeding up of delivery, the placing of stresses...those aspects of speech which are integral to communication but do not communicate in any simple way are not of interest to Langer. Nor, by extension, is the potential absence of those aspect; the flat, monotone delivery. *Holocaust Testimonies* does not admit the style of speech. Langer institutes a context for receiving Holocaust testimonies through the various classifications of memory he devises. It could be argued that the conception of language employed within this context is one which pays insufficient attention to drive investment (or lack of it) in testimonial texts. This insufficiency, which I will return to later in the thesis, is one that is also shared by Agamben.

In *Spirit in Ashes*, Edith Wyschogrod also considers the relationship between language and testimony at length. Wyschogrod distinguishes between death-worlds and life worlds. In the death-world '*a massive intervention in a taken-for-granted system of meanings*' takes place as a result of which '*new meanings become affixed to the body through the systematic substitution of pain for the ordinary complex of meanings that constitutes our corporeal transactions*'.<sup>26</sup> Ordinary language is replaced by a new language of pain which '*lies outside any linguistic referential system*' and which is '*first noticed as a gap in linguistic possibility*'.<sup>27</sup> The inmates have never encountered experiences analogous to those in the camps. Their life-world vocabulary of experience proves inadequate in the death-world. They possess the vocabulary of a life-world where "thirst" is a brief irritation, where "hunger" is easily sated, in which "pain" is uncommon and "death" is a rarity. In the life-world death *means* because it is infrequent; it

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid. p.204.

<sup>26</sup> Edith Wyschogrod, *Spirit in Ashes*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), p.30.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

constitutes an event. In the life-world only the doctor, the undertaker and the gravedigger are *familiar* with death and even then it is a *respected* death. It does not pass unnoticed. The camp inmates live in a world which they cannot contextualize. They cannot make those connections and linkages which are necessary to place an experience in context, to *form* an experience. The camp is a compressed space. It is a reduction of experience. Wyschogrod suggests the linguistic process reflects this shrinkage.<sup>28</sup> In the death-world the old language persists but it becomes a palimpsest. It is over-written by new and contradictory meanings. The number of words remains the same but the meaning of each word is multiplied. Wyschogrod proposes that '*a systematic effort is made to create confusion in regard to accepted, taken-for-granted meanings by developing opposed meanings in order to produce the widest possible discrepancy between alleged and actual significations*'.<sup>29</sup> Meaning is muddled in the camps. For example, the word "work" is used cynically '*to suggest productive effort even though [...] it means unremitting hard labor*'.<sup>30</sup> As Maurice Blanchot explains in *The Writing of the Disaster*, for the camp inmate '*work has ceased to be his way of living and has become his way of dying*'.<sup>31</sup> The word "work" which in the life world means an activity through which a living is earned in the death-world becomes instead a means to the end of life. In the death-world the old signification of each word endures but every word also comes to signify death; '*for each and every signifier the range of obsolete meanings is retained together with the new signified, death*'.<sup>32</sup> The old language becomes a dead language. This dead language in which all words lead to death is specific to the death-world. The language of the life-world is alive and expansive. It would need to collapse inwards to capture the experience of the death-world within itself.

In the death-world death ceased to be dignified. In the space of mass-death death ceased to mean anything other than itself. It is, for instance, no longer "heroic". There are no alternative linkages. The signifier "death" signifies only "death". The gap between signifier and signified has, in fact, ceased to be. There is no ambiguity. There is no free-

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid. p.208.

<sup>31</sup> Maurice Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*, Trans. Ann Smock, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995), p.81.

<sup>32</sup> Wyschogrod, *Spirit in Ashes*, p.31.



play. There is no meaning. There just *is* this cessation. This is a death beyond context. As such it is a death that is not present. The possibility of man-made mass death exemplified by what occurred in the camps creates the potential of a '*negation so profound that all presence would be snuffed out*' and thereby '*all difference as well*'.<sup>33</sup> The camps open up the idea, impossible to contemplate before, of absolute silence.

Wyschogrod recognizes that for the death-world to succeed it needs witnesses; '*the scheme of annihilation must exhibit to a token number of victims the nullity of their symbolic structures, to force them to comprehend their loss*'.<sup>34</sup> There must be death and there must be living-dead. The reference here is not, however, to the figure of the Muselmann. The living-dead who bear witness to their own death do so consciously. They are not unthinking. They think of themselves as animals and excrement. The death-world '*attempts to divest (the inmate) of the complexity of consciousness and reduce him as far as possible to animal status*'.<sup>35</sup> Wyschogrod gives the example of Victor Frankl but we could equally refer to Robert Antelme's account of Gandersheim. These are inmates who see themselves as inhuman – who confirm the perception held of them by their oppressors – but who still see themselves. They still have the capacity to think. They think but not reflexively. There is no cogito ergo sum. There is, instead, "I think I am not". There is dead thinking. This resonates with Laub's view that there were no "I" witnesses from within the event. The inmates no longer had a secure sense of self and hence were incapable of bearing witness. If, as Laub goes on to suggest, the only way to bear witness is to return to a fuller self-hood, a return that is enabled by the occurrence of that testimony (a somewhat paradoxical notion) then a central aspect of the camp experience – the loss of self – is lost in the account. There is a gap between the death-world and the life-world, between the world of shit and the world of self, between the inhuman and the human that must be crossed before witnessing is possible. To provide the context that their testimony brings us about the experience of the camps the survivors must part with a part of that very context. They must lose their loss of self. In my analysis of the work of Charlotte Delbo I will consider how writing attests to this loss of self whilst also marking a return back to subject-hood.

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid. p.94.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid. p.114.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid. p.147.



The conclusion is partially a response to Giorgio Agamben's *Remnants of Auschwitz*, with its worrying emphasis on the *figure* of the *Muselmann*. Agamben argues that the *Muselmann* is the sole aspect of the camps that needs to be attested to, this because if '*the survivor bears witness not to the gas chambers or to Auschwitz but to the Muselmann, if he speaks only on the basis of the impossibility of speaking, then his testimony cannot be denied*'.<sup>36</sup> In the conclusion I consider the four photographs taken by a member of the *Sonderkommando* at Auschwitz in August 1944 (photographs which were subsequently smuggled out to the Polish resistance) as offering an alternative means of bearing witnessing to the 'impossibility of speaking'. These photographs are not simply figurative (unlike Agamben's *Muselmann*) but operate at the edge of figuration. They do not signify horror, they *show* it. They show 'something' which cannot be recognized as a thing, something that is at the limits of the perceptible, next to nothing. It is the next to nothing that this entire thesis seeks to catch in language.

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<sup>36</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz*, p.164.

## Chapter One

### Execrable Speech: Reading the Pamphlets of Louis-Ferdinand Céline

In 1980, Julia Kristeva's *Pouvoirs de l'horreur* was first published in France by Éditions du Seuil.<sup>1</sup> The work was swiftly translated; an English translation appearing in 1982.<sup>2</sup> *Pouvoirs de l'horreur* or *Powers of Horror* is, perhaps, Kristeva's best-known work in the Anglo-American world.<sup>3</sup> It has been highly influential across many disciplines. The concept of abjection as it is developed in *Powers of Horror* has proved useful in fields as diverse as anthropology, art history, criminology, film studies and literary studies.<sup>4</sup> In *Powers of Horror*, Kristeva uses the writings of the French author Louis-Ferdinand Céline as the mainstay for her argument that avant-garde literature has replaced the sacred as the site where abjection is sublimated. The choice of Céline as exemplar has provoked a hostile response from many commentators. This is because of the writers virulent anti-Semitism and avowed support for fascism. Later in this chapter the validity of some of these highly critical responses will be assessed. Beforehand, however, a proper understanding of the project that constitutes *Powers of Horror* cannot be accomplished without situating the text within the context of Julia Kristeva's work both before and subsequent to its publication. Specifically, how should we understand *Powers*

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<sup>1</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Pouvoirs de l'horreur: Essai sur l'abjection*, (Paris: Éditions de Seuil, 1980).

<sup>2</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, Trans. Leon S. Roudiez, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982). From now on I shall refer to the text by the English title. I will use translations for all French texts unless none exist.

<sup>3</sup> When this was put to her in a recent interview conducted by John Lechte, Julia Kristeva disagreed stating that whilst *Powers of Horror* was popular with artists many others were interested in different aspects of her work. See Julia Kristeva, 'Interview: Sharing Singularity,' in John Lechte & Maria Margaroni, *Julia Kristeva: Live Theory*, (London: Continuum, 2004), pp.154-55.

<sup>4</sup> See for example, James Ferguson, *Expectations of Modernity: Myths and Meanings of Urban Life on the Zambian Copperbelt* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), Carol Ockman, *Ingres's Eroticized Bodies: Retracing the Serpentine Line* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), Claire Valier, 'Punishment, Border Crossings and the Powers of Horror,' in *Theoretical Criminology*, 6:3 (2002), pp.319-37., Tina Chanter, 'The Picture of Abjection: Thomas Vinterberg's "The Celebration",' in *parallax* 30, 10:1 (January-March 2004), pp.30-39, Barbara Creed, *The Monstrous Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis*, (London: Routledge, 1993) and Susan E. Gustafson, *Absent Mothers and Orphaned Fathers: Narcissism and Abjection in Lessing's Aesthetic and Dramatic Production*, (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1995).



of Horror in relation to the works *La révolution du langage poétique* and *Histoires d'amour*; published in 1974 and 1983 respectively?<sup>5</sup>

*Powers of Horror* might be thought of as a transitional text for Kristeva. It is 'the in-between, the ambiguous, the composite'.<sup>6</sup> The interest in the philosophy of language so manifest in *Revolution in Poetic Language* has almost disappeared as have many of the Marxist elements of Kristeva's earlier analysis. These have been replaced by an increased emphasis on the psychoanalytic component which was previously operating within Kristeva's conception of language. The work, however, maintains a strong focus on the status of the semiotic in signification. In *Tales of Love*, this focus will be shifted towards the symbolic. Kelly Oliver has suggested that a change can also be read from a concentration on rejection in *Revolution in Poetic Language* and *Powers of Horror* towards one on identification in *Tales of Love* and *Soleil Noir*.<sup>7</sup> *Powers of Horror* also contains the seed of the idea of the 'imaginary-father' which Kristeva will go on to develop in much more detail in *Tales of Love*.<sup>8</sup>

The transitional nature of *Powers of Horror* within the framework of Kristeva's thinking is somewhat fitting given the subject-matter of the text itself. The abject, that which causes the experience Kristeva labels abjection, is 'what does not respect borders, positions, rules'.<sup>9</sup> *Powers of Horror* is, itself, not easily positioned within the evolution of Kristeva's thinking. It shares affinities with both earlier and later works. It continues the interest with the rejection of the symbolic that Kristeva elaborated in *Revolution in Poetic Language* yet here this interest concerns how rejection makes identification possible. It is a work that explores how the path to the mirror-phase and the Oedipus complex is cleared through a prior rejection of the mother. *Powers of Horror* seeks to

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<sup>5</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Révolution du langage poétique, l'avant-garde à la fin du seizième siècle: Lautréamont et Mallarmé*, (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1974), translated in part as *Revolution in Poetic Language*, Trans. Leon S. Roudiez, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984). Julia Kristeva, *Histoires de amour*, (Paris: Editions Denöel, 1983), translated as *Tales of Love*, Trans. Leon S. Roudiez, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987). From now on I shall refer to the texts by their English titles.

<sup>6</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, p.4.

<sup>7</sup> Kelly Oliver, *Reading Kristeva: Unraveling the Double-bind*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), p.11. Julia Kristeva, *Soleil noir: depression et mélancholie*, (Paris: Gallimard, 1987) translated as *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia*, Trans. Leon S. Roudiez, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989). I will henceforth refer to this text by its English title.

<sup>8</sup> In *Powers of Horror*, Kristeva speculates, for example, about a "possession previous to my advent: a being-there of the symbolic that a father might or might not embody". Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, p.10.

<sup>9</sup> Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, p.4.



account for how the entry into the Symbolic realm is made possible in the first place. Kristeva contends that prior to the mirror-stage (in which the child identifies with an image outside of itself and begins to recognize what it lacks and what it desires, and begins to imagine fulfilling those desires) there must be an earlier stage in which the child ejects itself from the mother. As Kristeva explains, even ‘*before being “like,” “I” am not but do “separate,” “reject,” “ab-ject”*’.<sup>10</sup> The child must leave the orbit of the mother before the mirror-image can fascinate. The most archaic experience of abjection is therefore related to the maternal. It is the process by which provisional borders between the infant and the mother are established through repeated efforts by the infant to expel the mother. These borders must be brought into being before the misrecognition that characterizes the mirror-stage becomes possible. The child must already have some sense of difference and distance in order to see beyond the realm of plenitude that is the Mother to an image outside this realm. The lack of lack that is the mother must cease to *be* before the mirror-stage occurs.<sup>11</sup>

That which is expelled is never, however, wholly voided. The mother never abandons the subject. The abject persists as a kind of constitutive outside to the subject. It is an outside that poses a perpetual threat to the inside whilst also acting as its guarantor. When the subject encounters instances of material or moral ambiguity – when the subject encounters what is abject – the memory of the abject mother is triggered. Our encounters with the abject in the everyday are carefully regulated. That which is abject poses a threat to the subject because it reminds the subject of its provisional nature. It has the potential to undo the separation between inside and outside that the infant fought so hard to establish. For this reason all societies have developed taboos and laws which work to police the way the abject is experienced. Much of the middle section of *Powers of Horror* is concerned with elaborating the psychic underpinnings of these means of governing interactions with the abject. Kristeva focuses particularly on the ways in which these interactions have been regulated within a Judeo-Christian context. The means by which abjection is controlled alters in response to changes in religious structures. In the chapters ‘Semiotics of Biblical Abomination’ and ‘...Qui Tollis Peccata Mundi’ Kristeva explores

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<sup>10</sup> Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, p.13.

<sup>11</sup> I will provide a fuller discussion of this process later.

these changes. She argues that biblical purity laws form an extension of more ancient traditions of defilement. These purity laws are most fully articulated in the books of Leviticus and Numbers. The differentiations between the pure and the impure which are laid out in these books bear witness to nascent Judaism's struggles with paganism and in particular with maternal cults. The impure is often associated either implicitly or explicitly with the maternal. The taboo against incest forms the originating mytheme which generated the purity laws.<sup>12</sup> This is exemplified by the exhortation in Exodus that '*Thou shalt not seethe a kid in his mother's milk*' (Exodus 23:19).<sup>13</sup> It is not milk as nourishment that is at issue here but rather the symbolic value of the milk in question. It is not abominable to drink milk but milk does become abominable when it is used for seething or cooking the young goat; when it is used as part of a '*cultural culinary fancy, which sets up an abnormal bond between mother and child*'.<sup>14</sup> The prohibition is a metaphor for incest. This metaphor is repeated in Leviticus in the ban on sacrificing a cow or ewe along with their young on the same day: '*And whether it be cow or ewe ye shall not kill it and her young both in one day*' (Leviticus 22:28).

Kristeva concedes that some of the biblical prohibitions appear to serve a more immediate and practical purpose such as those laws which relate to leprosy. She writes that it is certain that '*leprosy does objectively cause serious damages in a people with a strong community life and, moreover, an often nomadic one*'.<sup>15</sup> In fact, however, the practicality of the prohibitions that surround leprosy are less certain than Kristeva believes thereby lending further support to her understanding of the purity laws as guarding against fusion with the feminine, with the mother. The impurity subsequently translated as leprosy is unlikely to correspond to the contagious, flesh-eating disease of that name. In *Ritual and Morality*, Hyam Maccoby points out that the word *lepra* used in the Septuagint does not translate as leprosy; the Greek word for which is actually either *elephas* or *elephantiasis*.<sup>16</sup> *Lepra* refers instead to skin diseases of various kinds such as eczema or psoriasis which are not usually transmissible or life-threatening. The taboo

<sup>12</sup> Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, p.106.

<sup>13</sup> All biblical quotations are taken from the King James Version of the Holy Bible.

<sup>14</sup> Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, p.104.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid. p.101.



which is ostensibly against leprosy is therefore probably less practical than Kristeva thinks. Maccoby goes on to explain that many diseases which are far more infectious were not included in the ritual purity system. He believes that the banishment of the so called leper stems from his or her appearance. It is the visible breaking down of inside and outside at the level of the skin which must be removed from sight. In her discussion of this prohibition Kristeva also highlights the visibility of skin disease and the troublingly evident breaking down of the most basic of boundaries between inside and outside that accompanies it.

Maccoby lends further support to Kristeva's claim that the purity laws work to purge Judaism's roots in the religions of the archaic Mother Goddess in his discussion of the rite of the Red Cow. In this rite a Red Cow is sacrificed and its ashes (once mixed with water) provide a source of purification against the most severe form of impurity which is corpse-impurity. This purification rite manifestly mixes both purity and impurity because in the preparation and performance of it the participants become unclean. This admixture reinforces Kristeva's assertion that the pure and the impure are logically complicit. A complicity which she believes can be located within the Hebrew word *t'bh* or *to'ebah* which demonstrates the '*economic inseparability of pure and impure in the Bible*,' and means an abomination that is also a prohibition, a defilement that is also a law.<sup>17</sup>

In the ritual of the Red Cow the expression which the scriptures use to designate the purifying water-cum-ashes is *mei niddah* which is usually translated as 'waters of purification'. Maccoby, however, explains that '(...) the word "*niddah*" has been used in *Leviticus* with only one meaning, "*menstruation*". (...) the Red Cow's ashes when mixed with water, are called "*water of menstruation*".<sup>18</sup> He reads the rite as one which bears witness to a prior age in which menstrual blood was revered for its healing and purifying power. Menstrual blood is usually defined as impure within *Leviticus* but recoded as water and ashes it is able to function as a substance of purification. The ceremony is '*the*

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<sup>16</sup> Hyam Maccoby, *Ritual and Morality: The Ritual Purity System and its Place in Judaism*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp.118-19. I return to Kristeva's and Maccoby's thinking around the status and significance of skin in my chapter on the writings of Charlotte Delbo.

<sup>17</sup> Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, p.107.

<sup>18</sup> Maccoby, *Ritual and Morality*, pp.106-07.

*last vestige in the religion of the Israelite Sky-God of the earth-goddess*'.<sup>19</sup> It provides a further example of the disavowed feminine within the purity rituals of Judaism.

In the chapter '*...Qui Tollis Peccata Mundi*,' Kristeva shifts her analysis from Judaism to a consideration of Christian articulations of the abject. In Christianity she suggests that the threat of the abject '*comes no longer from outside but from within*'.<sup>20</sup> This interiorizing of the abject produces a Christian subject riven by an inner division. As Kristeva explains, '*evil, thus displaced into the subject, will not cease tormenting him from within, no longer as a polluting or defiling substance, but as the ineradicable repulsion of his henceforth divided and contradictory being*'.<sup>21</sup> In contrast to Judaism, where it is thrust aside, Christianity spiritualizes the abject. Impurity is now man's responsibility, it originates in personal conduct. The impure is '*subordinated to judgment and dependent upon the subject*' and as such '*assumes the status not of a substance that is cut off but of an action that is indecent*'.<sup>22</sup>

This brief summary of Kristeva's social history of differing religious responses to the abject demonstrates the changing ways in which the subject experiences abjection. These are culturally and historically specific. The question that arises for Kristeva after this historical detour is how abjection comes to be coded in a secular world. The contemporary Western world is one in which religious structures have ceased to hold the power and relevance previously associated with them. It is now the avant-garde literature which acts to safeguard the subject from the abject. In the present, '*owing to the crisis in Christianity, abjection elicits more archaic responses that are culturally prior to sin; through them it again assumes its biblical status, and beyond it that of defilement in primitive societies*'.<sup>23</sup> This crisis is one precipitated by the collapse of the Other; the symbolic death of God or the Father. In the shadow of this demise the aesthetic task becomes '*a descent into the foundations of the symbolic construct*' and '*amounts to retracing the fragile limits of the speaking being, closest to its dawn, to the bottomless "primacy" constituted by primal repression*'.<sup>24</sup> Modern literature writes into the abyss. It

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid. p.112.

<sup>20</sup> Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, p.114.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid. p.116.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid. p.119.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid. pp.17-18.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid. p.18.



writes towards the abject, approaching symbolic collapse, not in order to resist it but rather to unveil it. This literature provides ‘*an elaboration, a discharge, and a hollowing out of abjection through the Crisis of the Word*’.<sup>25</sup> Literature works to articulate the abject and thereby void it. The author Louis-Ferdinand Céline provides Kristeva’s primary example of this kind of literature although other writers including Artaud, Baudelaire, Bataille, Borges, Dostoyevsky, Joyce, Kafka, Lautréamont, Proust and Sartre are also mentioned.

It is important to note that Kristeva privileges writing as the site within which the abject is at once hypostatized and hollowed out. In a number of readings of *Powers of Horror* the importance of writing as a way of manifesting the abject in contemporary society is neglected. The focus is instead placed on the kind of physical demonstrations of the abject detailed in the book’s opening chapter. The abject is too simply equated with piss, shit, vomit, viscera, and corpses. For Kristeva the abject is also intimately connected with language and specifically with avant-garde literature. It cannot be disputed that shit and death often form the subject-matter of the kind of abject writing that Kristeva goes on to analyze but it is also certain that the style of this writing is as important as its content. This chapter attempts to redress the neglect that the final third of *Powers of Horror* has met with. It is here that abject writing is examined in some detail by Kristeva. The chapter will also assess the merit of the reservations some have expressed about Kristeva’s choice of Céline as her privileged example of this kind of writing.

Before undertaking this analysis it will, however, be necessary to briefly summarize how Kristeva conceived of language at the time when *Powers of Horror* was written. The key text to consider in this context is *Revolution in Poetic Language*, which formed Kristeva’s doctoral thesis. It explores the way that poetic language can destabilize the symbolic aspect of signification. As Kristeva elaborates in her thesis, language possesses both a semiotic and a symbolic aspect. The semiotic is composed of the ‘*rhythm, intonation, and echolalias of the mother-child symbiosis*’.<sup>26</sup> It is marked by the drives, which are channeled through the guidance of the mother; thereby becoming discursive and socially conditioned. The symbolic is that place within the Symbolic order

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid. p.208.

<sup>26</sup> Kelly Oliver, *Reading Kristeva*, p.34.

wherein the subject can take up a position and provides the mode of communication rather than the means by which communication takes place. The voice as the material support of speech – the tone, the rhythm – would be on the side of the semiotic whereas the words themselves – not the way they are articulated – would be on the side of the symbolic. The two aspects aggravate each other and thereby animate language. The semiotic and the symbolic are not solely present in speech, they also both manifest themselves in literary texts which comprise of both a *phenotext* and a *genotext*. The *phenotext* is allied to the symbolic whilst the *genotext* is associated with the semiotic. The two can ‘be separated only for the purposes of exposition’.<sup>27</sup> The *phenotext* is that part of the text concerned with communication whilst the *genotext* describes the style by which that communication is carried out. In avant-garde literature stylistic innovations can often act to privilege the semiotic element of language. To lose the symbolic element entirely, however, would be to descend into psychosis; it would be to lose the self. The avant-garde writer therefore often flirts with psychosis. Theirs is a writing that endangers the self. The two examples Kristeva uses to illustrate the writing practice of the avant-garde and its revolutionary potential are the French poets Stéphane Mallarmé and the Comte de Lautréamont. The part of *Revolution in Poetic Language* where this exposition occurs has not so far been translated. *Revolution in Poetic Language* is divided into three parts, of which only the first part has so far been published in full in English.<sup>28</sup>

As part of the analysis of Lautréamont’s *Les Chants de Maldoror*, Kristeva describes how numerous passages in the poetry describe a poetic subject that is divided. The subject embodies a lived dialectic. This divided subject demonstrates that “I” is no longer an instance but is instead ‘*un mouvement rythmique, une dynamique ondulatoire*’.<sup>29</sup> The “I” never *is* but is always in the process of becoming. The kinetic force behind this rhythmic becoming is created by the perpetual tension that exists between the semiotic and the symbolic. The two aspects of signification function to sustain each other in a continual oscillation. This dialectic is not one wherein the terms can become reconciled through the advent of a third term. The disappearance of either

<sup>27</sup> John Mowitt, *Text: The Genealogy of an Antidisciplinary Object*, (Durham, Duke University Press, 1992), p.114.

<sup>28</sup> For a discussion of the translation of *Revolution in Poetic Language* see Sara Beardsworth, *Julia Kristeva: Psychoanalysis and Modernity*, (Albany: SUNY, 2004), fn.1, p.278.



term would also be disastrous. The absence of a symbolic dimension to signification would cause the subject to descend into psychosis. The removal of the dynamic semiotic element would result in stasis and totalitarianism. The semiotic and the symbolic co-exist in a productive antagonism.<sup>30</sup> This antagonism is, however, never constant. At certain instances either the semiotic or the symbolic is privileged and ascendant.

In her analysis of Mallarmé and Lautréamont, Kristeva examines how the two poets worked in different ways to disrupt the advantageous position occupied by the symbolic in language. The underside to this dominant mode of signification offered the glimpse of an alternative state of things, it held a revolutionary potential. The poets worked to overturn convention, to liberate verse from culturally concretized laws of meter and prosody.<sup>31</sup> Mallarmé freed the semiotic aspect of language suppressed by traditional verse structure. This was achieved through the '*division du sens, de la proposition, du mot; perte de leur identité au profit d'un rythme, d'une musique, d'une mélodie*'.<sup>32</sup> In the case of Mallarmé, however, this renewed sonorousness in verse, this revealed musicality, was also supplemented by a graphic dimension. As Kristeva explains, '*à ces ressources proprement vocaliques se joignent les "procédés graphiques:" les traits d'un graphème, la disposition dans la page, les longueurs des lignes, les blancs, etc, etc., qui contribuent à construire une "totalité sémiotique" interprétable dans des directions multiples, substitut de l'unité thétique, disposition provisoire et fragile du procès signifiant*'.<sup>33</sup> Mallarmé therefore works language at both the level of appearance and sound, introducing fractures in the symbolic and thereby causing the semiotic

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<sup>29</sup> '(...) a rhythmic motion, an undulating dynamic'. Kristeva, *La révolution du langage poétique*, p.320.

<sup>30</sup> See Lechte & Margaroni, *Julia Kristeva*, p.17.

<sup>31</sup> See Kristeva, *La révolution du langage poétique*, pp.212-13.

<sup>32</sup> '*Scission of sense, of clause, of the word; the loss of their identity in favour of a rhythm, of a music, of a melody*'. Ibid. p.212.

<sup>33</sup> '*These properly vocal resources are joined by graphic processes: the lines of lettering, their layout on the page, the length of the lines, the blanks etc., which go towards constructing a semiotic totality open to*

underside to rise to the surface. The stasis at the level of meaning which the symbolic functions to ensure is disrupted and sense proliferates. The visual dimension to the practice of writing which Kristeva details here will be explored further in relation to Céline's pamphlets and also in the context of the manuscripts which were buried by members of the *Sonderkommando* at Auschwitz.

The analyses of both Mallarmé and, to a lesser extent, Lautréamont, in *Revolution in Poetic Language* demonstrate the way language can be reinvigorated through syntactic invention. The interference that avant-garde literature effects at the level of grammar and meter, the noise it introduces into language, contains a revolutionary potential because it opens the symbolic to a possible reappropriation on improved terms. In a writer like Céline, however, this reappropriation does not take place.<sup>34</sup> The noise is never eliminated. Mallarmé and Lautréamont demonstrated that language was not fixed and that convention should not be mistaken for concretion. The liberation of the semiotic in their literature acts as a reminder that language is malleable and meaning is multiple. Céline's writing shares many traits with the work of the two Nineteenth century poets. It occurs in a different historical context, however, at a time when the spirit of revolution had been replaced by the torpor of signification that accompanied totalitarianism. Totalitarianism introduces the inertia that is a *telos*; it provides a point of fixity for meaning. It is against this backdrop that Céline writes towards the abject and the loss of the symbolic. He writes towards the horror; the horror which Kristeva describes as forming 'the "drive

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multiple interpretation and substituting a provisional and fragile mode of signification for one of thetic unity'. Ibid. p.219.

<sup>34</sup> See Julia Kristeva, 'On Céline, Music and the "Blunder",' in Julia Kristeva, *Interviews*, Ed. Ross Mitchell Guberman, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), p.231.



*foundations” of fascism’.*<sup>35</sup> It may be this writing towards the horror which causes him to identify so strongly with the politics of fascism in his everyday life. He writes towards the reason for his own political failings. Yet this writing offers an alternative to extreme politics because it demonstrates that the abject can be mastered in the aesthetic realm through ‘*literary devices and writing style*’.<sup>36</sup> Totalitarian politics does not seek to purge horror but, instead, manipulates the powers of horror to its advantage. The crisis in subjectivity posed by the potential for unmediated contact with the abject causes a desire for identification with an authority figure, a personage embodying the paternal function; a Duce, a Franco, or a Führer. The dictator shores up the symbolic. Modernist art and literature is shunned by totalitarian regimes because it provides a space within which catharsis can take place. The aesthetic realm by elaborating the abject also evacuates it. It purges and purifies. Perversely Céline’s writing practice posed a significant threat to the politics he endorsed because it could potentially render the role those politics served in the psycho-social realm redundant.

Céline’s journey towards the abject, towards the outside of the subject, is one Kristeva retraces in her own writing. *Powers of Horror* is a sinking into horror, a descent towards the abject. The abject is the outside to inside and outside; the before of language and the beyond of difference. It is not the trace of the Real as it is manifested by the drives in language. It is the drives before they are divided and mapped, before they are bound to the symbolic. It is matter before it is made to mean. It is matter unnamed. It is the noise of the semiotic prior to its meshing and shaping within the symbolic. Abjection is the process by which the abject is cast outside. It is the banishment of the unbounded.

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<sup>35</sup> Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, p.155.

<sup>36</sup> Kristeva, ‘On Céline,’ p.231.

It is the means by which a boundary is brought into being. The experience of abjection both protects and imperils. It safeguards because it causes the subject to retch and reject the abject. It imperils because it brings the subject into a state of intimacy with its origins. The abject is unsettling because it refuses to be positioned and ruled. It is elusive. The uncertain nature of the abject may explain why there is a lack of conceptual clarity in Kristeva's own theorization of it. This conceptual slippage that characterizes the abject in *Powers of Horror* is also reflected in this thesis. The abject by its very nature refuses definition therefore the definitions that are given at various times in the chapters that follow should be understood as provisional. The 'meaning' of the abject is in perpetual flux and it is into this fluxion that Kristeva was pulled by her own fascination with horror; a horror that is unfixed and unfixable, the horror of unfixity. Kristeva mirrors Céline's journey into the night. She herself descends into darkness. *Tales of Love*, however, marks her return from the night. It constitutes the reappropriation of the paternal function that Céline failed to accomplish. In *Tales of Love*, Kristeva postulates the existence of a non-symbolic third in the Imaginary realm, an imaginary father. The imaginary father has the status of a non-object that attracts the proto-subject. The subject-to-be identifies with the imaginary father. This identification takes place before the rejection of the mother. As Kristeva explains, the identification with '*the imaginary father, who is such a godsend that you have the impression that it is he who is transferred into you, withstands a process of rejection involving what may have been chaos and is about to become an "abject"*'.<sup>37</sup> The mother is rejected but a connection is maintained with the figure of the imaginary father. This connection protects against the '*emptiness of*

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<sup>37</sup> Kristeva, *Tales of Love*, p.41.



*separation*'.<sup>38</sup> The imaginary father is a '*forming presence*' that draws the infant into the imaginary exchange.<sup>39</sup> It enables the mirror-stage to take place. In *Tales of Love*, Kristeva posits the existence of a third term prior to the role of the Father in the Oedipus complex. This third term embraces the infant as it looses its bond with the mother. It acts as an antidote to the solitude that attends rejection.

Céline's writing is one that rejects without establishing the requisite connection that would ward off this emptiness. There is no tale of love in his writing, only hatred and loathing. He is a hate-filled writer, committed to exposing the Jews for the villains he perceives them to be and through this to saving France. He tries to mask his hatred behind morality; by writing the pamphlets he is doing the 'right thing'. As Theodor W. Adorno writes – as part of his critique of Sartre's *What is Literature?* – there 'was no foul deed committed even under fascism that did not clothe itself in a moral justification'.<sup>40</sup> The modern reader usually reads through Céline's dissembling (as indeed did many of his contemporaries) to the inexcusable and irrational hatred that underlies the pamphlets. The sensible reader gags at Céline's loathing, manifesting what might be termed a visceral ethics. The reader physically recoils at the content of the pamphlets. This content is often extreme:

*Les Juifs, racialement, sont des monstres, des hybrides loupés, tirillés qui doivent disparaître. Tout ce qu'ils trafiquent, tout ce qu'ils manigancent est maudit. Dans l'élevage humain, ce ne sont, tout bluff à part, que bâtards gangreneux, ravageurs, pourisseurs. Le Juif n'a jamais été persécuté par les Aryens. Il s'est persécuté lui-même. Il est le damné de sa propre substance, des tiraillements de sa viande d'hybride. D'où cet état de plastronage perpétuel, de*

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid. p.42.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid. p.43.

<sup>40</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, 'Commitment,' in Theodor W. Adorno, *Notes to Literature: Volume 2*, Trans. Shierry Weber Nicholson, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), p.92.

*dervicherie compensatrice, cette arrogance, cet extravagant culot, cette jactance saoulante, cette effronterie brailleuse, si dégueulasse, si répugnante.*<sup>41</sup>

This kind of writing encourages hatred of the Jews (although precisely who the Jews are varies throughout the pamphlets) and demonstrates Céline's sympathy with some of the policies advocated by Hitler. Indeed a general sympathy with the leaders of European fascism is made explicit, '*personnellement je trouve Hitler, Franco, Mussolini fabuleusement débonnaires, admirablement magnanimes, infiniment trop à mon sens, pacifistes bélants pour tout dire, à 250 Prix Nobel, hors concours, par acclamations!*'.<sup>42</sup> There is something hyperbolic about this admiration, as there is with the hatred. An excessive admiration is evinced which needs to be considered. Even if the intention is to exaggerate things for effect, this excess in the language may work to undermine the ostensible point that Céline is trying to make. The written resists the intention of the writer. *Bagatelles pour un massacre* was interpreted as an immense joke by André Gide who praised the pamphlet.<sup>43</sup> He did not express similar sentiments about the two subsequent pamphlets but Gide demonstrates that the meanings writing accrues exceed the author's intent. Writing will not collaborate with its author.

Who was the author of the pamphlets? Louis-Ferdinand Destouches (1894-1961) was one of France's most important authors in the inter-war years. He usually wrote under the pseudonym Louis-Ferdinand Céline (his mother's first name was Louise-Céline). His earliest novel *Voyage au bout de la nuit* (*Journey to the End of the Night*) published in 1932 was a best-seller. It follows the life of the character Ferdinand Bardamu, beginning with his experiences in the First World War – through journeys to French colonial Africa and the United States of America – ending up with an account of

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<sup>41</sup> 'Racially, the Jews are monsters, flawed half-breeds, a plague that needs to disappear. All that they peddle and scheme is cursed. In terms of human breeding they are, all kidding aside, gangrenous hybrids, pests, putrefactors. The Jew has never been persecuted by the Aryans. The Jew persecuted himself. He is damned by his own body, by the tugging of the hybrid meat that he is. From this comes a state of perpetual swaggering, of compensatory uppitness, the arrogance, the incredible cheek, the head-spinning conceit, the vociferous effrontery, which is so disgusting and repellant, originates.' (translation my own). Louis-Ferdinand Céline, *L'école des cadavres*, (Paris; Denöel, 1938), p.108.

<sup>42</sup> 'Personally I find Hitler, Franco and Mussolini to be wonderfully good-natured, admirably magnanimous, in fact in my opinion far too much so, bleating pacifists really, to the tune of 250 Nobel Prizes, awarded outside of the competition, by acclaim!' (translation my own). Ibid. p.62.

<sup>43</sup> See Philippe Alméras, 'Céline's Masquerade,' in *Céline and the Politics of Difference*, p.75. Hannah Arendt discusses Gide's reaction to the pamphlet in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, (San Diego: Harcourt, 1950), p.335.



his time as a doctor working in one of the poorer districts of Paris. His second novel *Mort à Crédit* (*Death on Credit*), from 1936, was more stylistically innovative and less well received. Both books are based loosely on Céline's own life. From his first-hand knowledge of the sufferings of the Parisian poor Céline might have been expected to sympathize with socialism but instead he identified increasingly with rightwing politics both in the run-up to and during the Second World War. Between 1936 and 1942, Céline wrote four 'pamphlets'. These book length compositions were ostensibly satirical tracts. The first, *Mea Culpa*, is an attack upon communism and the USSR. The remaining three, *Bagatelles pour un massacre* (1937), *L'école des cadavres* (1938) and *Les beaux draps* (1941) are all primarily anti-Semitic diatribes. It is these works which chiefly contributed to Céline's pariah status after the war. During the Occupation he had friends in the German authorities and was considered by the French SS leader Helmut Knochen as a possible member of the Advisory Committee for the *Office Central Juif*.<sup>44</sup> Not all those German who knew Céline, however, were entirely taken by him. Ernst Jünger, for example, stated in his journal that '*there is in him the look that maniacs have, turned inward, which shines as from the bottom of a hole*'.<sup>45</sup> Céline also did not always turn his back on opponents of the occupation. In 1941 he lobbied the Préfet of Finistère to try and prevent the execution of a Breton, Noël L'Helgouarch who had cut a telephone cable leading to a German post. His intervention was unsuccessful. He was also reputed to have given medical treatment to members of the Resistance.<sup>46</sup> In June 1944 Céline did, however, turn his back on France, leaving for Germany accompanied by his wife Lucette and his pet cat Bébert. In Germany they went first to a hotel in Baden-Baden as guests of the Reich Foreign Ministry, then to a country estate at Kränzlin, ending up at Sigmaringen with most of the rest of the collaborators who had fled France. Céline felt unsafe at Sigmaringen and moved to Denmark in March 1945. He was to remain there in exile until 1951 when he returned to France after he was granted an amnesty for the sentence of one year's imprisonment handed down at his trial *in absentia* in 1950.

Jean-Paul Sartre, in his essay 'Qu'est-ce qu'un collaborateur?', written in August 1945, provides a psychological appraisal of the collaborator which might

<sup>44</sup> Nicholas Hewitt, *The Life of Céline*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), p.213.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid. fn.71. p.318.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid. p.215.

potentially provide some insight into Céline's character.<sup>47</sup> In the essay, Sartre understands collaboration to be a normal phenomenon equitable with crime and suicide.<sup>48</sup> The collaborator lives in ignorance of their collaborationist tendencies until favourable conditions for the trait to manifest itself arise. Collaboration cannot be confounded with a single form of politics (e.g. fascism) nor can it be linked to a particular class (e.g. the bourgeoisie). Rather for Sartre, it is a decision taken by an individual uninfluenced by such factors. In fact membership of a class or a strong political affiliation would probably make collaboration less likely. The fact that many of the collaborators originated in the bourgeoisie might, therefore, be understood to demonstrate the fragility of such a class identity. The collaborator usually originates in the unassimilated elements of society, in what we might call society's constitutive outside. For Sartre, those with a propensity for crime and those likely to commit suicide also derive from the social margins, hence the connection he establishes between the three. The collaborator may come from the fringes of the main political parties, from the upper echelons of the clergy (unhinged by the influence of Rome, hence out of touch with the grassroots of French Catholicism) and from royalist remnants in the bourgeoisie. For Sartre, the collaborators mainly emerge from the '*déchet social*,' the detritus of the social.<sup>49</sup>

Having examined the social origins of collaboration, Sartre goes on to study its psychological aspect. He finds that the collaborator will submit to any *fait accompli* whatever form it takes. These traitors confuse the fact that one must live with an event with the morality of its occurrence. Because it has happened the traitor presumes it is for the best. He has only a vague notion of progress, in which all change is perceived as progressive. The quisling goes with the flow, unconcerned by where current events will lead him. With the defeat of France he turned morality on its head, '*le collaborateur réaliste fait une morale renversée: au lieu de juger le fait à la lumière du droit, il fonde le droit sur le fait*'.<sup>50</sup> The fact of the occupation of France is not judged by its legitimacy, rather the fact of the occupation is what lends it legitimacy, is what legitimates.

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<sup>47</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, 'Qu'est ce qu'un collaborateur?', in Jean-Paul Sartre, *Situations III*, (Paris: Gallimard, 1949).

<sup>48</sup> Ibid. p.43.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid. p.49.

<sup>50</sup> 'The collaborator who is a realist constructs a reverse morality: instead of judging the fact in the light of its legitimacy, legitimacy is founded on the fact' (translation my own). Ibid. p.55.



Legitimacy occurs after the fact. Sartre perceives the collaborator as someone who seeks to replace the juridical relations of reciprocity and equality between men and nations with a return to a kind of feudal bond between lord and vassal. He elaborates:

*...très certainement la liaison féodale du collaborateur à son maître, a un aspect sexuel. Pour autant qu'on puisse concevoir l'état d'esprit de la collaboration, on y devine comme un climat de féminité. Le collaborateur parle au nom de la force, mais il n'est pas la force: il est la ruse, l'astuce qui s'appuie sur la force, il est même le charme et la séduction puisqu'il prétend jouer de l'attrait que la culture française exerce, d'après lui, sur les Allemands. Il me paraît qu'il y a là un curieux mélange de masochisme et d'homosexualité. Les milieux homosexuels parisiens d'ailleurs, ont fourni de nombreuses et brillantes recrues.*<sup>51</sup>

This relation between the master and the bondsman has a sexual aspect to it. For Sartre, the question of collaboration is not one of class but of sexuality. The collaborator – who seems to be exclusively male given the examples Sartre lists throughout his essay – is female. Céline's pamphlets seem too ugly to fit this gendering - their language is too forceful and vulgar - and do not display the tergiversation that Sartre finds in the feminine. The meaning of the pamphlets is not insidious. These are not *feuilles-fatales* luring the unsuspecting reader to hate. In the final third of *L'école des cadavers*, Céline mocks the reader who is contemptuous of his work, writing, '*si vous m'avez lu jusqu'au ici c'est déjà du tempérament, c'est déjà la preuve d'une haine solide*'.<sup>52</sup> The politics of the pamphlets are given to the reader up front. The reader who reads more than a few lines knows something of the author's viewpoint, of the writing's content, and can choose not to go on. Céline intimates that the reader who has read so far into the pamphlet must be taking some kind of pleasure from their reading.

The kind of writing that would fit Sartre's description of the collaborator would be one which was more duplicitous than the prose of the pamphlets. It would be an abject writing in the moral sense of the term. The collaborator is a mistress of deception.

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<sup>51</sup> '*...most definitely the feudal relationship between the collaborator and his master has a sexual element to it. In as much as we can conceive of the state of mind of the collaborator, one would guess it to be feminine in nature. The collaborator speaks in the name of power but is not that power, he is the cunning one, the shrewd one who finds support in power, he is even spell-binding and seductive because he asserts and uses the attraction he believes French culture exerts over the Germans. To me it appears that a curious mixture of masochism and homosexuality exists there. Paris's homosexual meeting-places provided a number of talented recruits in fact*' (translation my own). Sartre, 'Qu'est-ce qu'un collaborateur?', p.58.



Collaborationist writing would therefore be expected to display similar artifice. Kristeva describes the turncoat as abject in *Powers of Horror*. Abjection involves ‘*the traitor, the liar, the criminal with a good conscience, the shameless rapist, the killer who claims he is a savior...*’.<sup>53</sup> It is ‘*immoral, sinister, scheming, and shady: a terror that disassembles, a hatred that smiles, a passion that uses the body for barter instead of inflaming it, a debtor who sells you up, a friend who stabs you...*’.<sup>54</sup> The closest writing to abjection – to a collaborationist writing – that Sartre defines is poetry. Poetry is described as a ‘*trap to capture fleeting reality,*’ which does not act upon the world but rather receives it.<sup>55</sup> The poetic word is an image not a sign, the world is reflected in the word rather than the word reflecting the world. The poetic word seduces the world, entices it into language, it is a space waiting for the world. It bears some of the characteristics of the collaborator. Perhaps this is why Sartre will not even countenance the poetry of the resistance fighter Pierre Emmanuel as an example of committed literature; it is polluted with feeling. It is too feminine. The words have ‘*ambiguous properties*’ which get in the way of communication.<sup>56</sup> But Céline does not appear to be a poet by Sartre’s definition. Sartre explicitly contrasts the writing of poetry with the writing of pamphlets. Pamphlets express things whereas in poetry the words dispossess the writer of expression.

*Qu’est ce qu’un collaborateur?* also worked to frame the collaborator as homosexual.<sup>57</sup> Homosexuality is equated with femininity by Sartre. In Vichy France the collaborators used their powers of seduction – their feminine wiles – to gain acceptance by the German occupying force. Their allure is based upon the cultural make-up of France, its learned appeal. Sartre finds evidence for the feminization of the French nation in the work of several writers, amongst them, Robert Brasillach and Pierre-Eugène Drieu La Rochelle.<sup>58</sup> He writes that these writers use queer metaphors ‘*qui présentent les*

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<sup>52</sup> ‘If you’ve read this far you’ve already shown character, there’s already proof of a sound hate’. Céline, *L’école des cadavres*, p.213.

<sup>53</sup> Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, p.4.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, *What is Literature?*, Trans. Bernard Frechtman, (London: Methuen & Co, 1967), p.6.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid. p.10.

<sup>57</sup> The homosexual also became the collaborator (e.g. scapegoat) in the United States during the McCarthy era although this time their bedfellow was communism. See Axel Madsen, *The Sewing Circle*, (London: Robson Books, 1998), p.193.

<sup>58</sup> Sartre, ‘Qu’est-ce qu’un Collaborateur?’, p.58. Drieu La Rochelle was a well known writer in France in the inter-war years. He was director of the *Nouvelle Revue Française* during the occupation and committed suicide in 1945. Coincidentally, La Rochelle wrote an extended essay on the subject of suicide, entitled



*relations de la France et de l'Allemagne sous l'aspect d'une union sexuelle où la France joue la rôle de la femme*'.<sup>59</sup> The woman here is a woman-man as Sartre's subsequent comments about masochism and homosexuality make clear. The choice of Brasillach is therefore far from accidental, not because he feminized the French Republic – describing it as '*an old syphilitic whore, stinking of patchouli and yeast infection*' – but because he was a homosexual.<sup>60</sup> Brasillach is a gay collaborator. In her book *The Collaborator*, Alice Yaeger Kaplan discusses the connections that were made by the prosecution at Brasillach's trial between collaboration and sexuality. The author was accused of 'horizontal collaboration' with the Nazis, a charge usually leveled against French women who had slept with German soldiers.<sup>61</sup> Kaplan reads this preoccupation with homosexuality as symptomatic of a crisis in masculinity in France in the immediate aftermath of the occupation, a crisis generated because French men had '*felt defeated and powerless for four years*'.<sup>62</sup> The French man had felt passive, had felt 'feminine'. France felt shafted. Sartre's essay would seem to support such an interpretation. His essay also acts to delineate the collaborator – the collaborator is delineated as without delineation, as ambiguous, as a person who doesn't fit in anywhere, as an outsider – in order to construct a clear demarcation between the men of the resistance and the 'women' who supported the Vichy regime. As Jean Améry explains, this is because '*the resistance movement during and right after the war became the psychic foundation upon which the nation rested*'.<sup>63</sup> Clear distinctions are needed. The collaborators must be clearly demarcated in order to secure the legacy of the resistance.

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'*Récit Secret*,' which was published posthumously. See Pierre Drieu La Rochelle, *Récit secret*, (Paris: Gallimard, 1961), pp.6-44. Sartre also mentions Drieu La Rochelle's collaboration in *What is Literature?*, pp.46-7. & pp.145-46.

<sup>59</sup> Metaphors '*which present Franco-German relations as a kind of sexual union in which France plays the role of the woman*' (translation my own). Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> This quotation from Brasillach is taken from Alice Yaeger Kaplan's *The Collaborator – The Trial and Execution of Robert Brasillach*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), p.41. This does not seem to mirror the kind of enticing femininity Sartre describes. It is not the content of Brasillach's writing that interests Sartre so much as the sexuality of the author.

<sup>61</sup> For a discussion of 'horizontal collaboration' in this context, see Megan Koreman, *The Expectation of Justice: France 1944-1946*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999), pp.108-114. On p.112. Koreman offers a symbolic reading of horizontal collaboration as a form of perceived 'conquest' by the Germans.

<sup>62</sup> Kaplan, *The Collaborator*, p.164.

<sup>63</sup> Jean Améry, *Preface to the Future: Culture in a Consumer Society*, (London: Constable, 1964), p.18.

## M(anus)cripts

The anxiety Sartre manifests about sexuality in his essay on collaboration seems to have manifested itself prior to the fall of France. We can trace his uneasiness back to the *War Diaries* which were written towards the beginning of the war. It is here that Sartre first articulates his fascination with holes in a discussion which he will later incorporate into *Being and Nothingness*. In these passages written in December 1939 Sartre seeks to reclaim ‘holes’ from the Freudian school of psychoanalysis, ‘*Freud will consider that all holes, for the child, are symbolic anuses which attract him as a function of that kinship – whereas for my part I wonder whether the anus is not, in the child, an object of lust because it is a hole*’.<sup>64</sup> He claims that the infant’s fascination with holes originates in a holeness that is anterior to their relation to that ‘*lyrical hole*’ of the anus.<sup>65</sup> This meditation on holes occurs immediately after some paragraphs about viscosity and disgust. Sigmund Freud’s own initial arguments about the anus-hole in *On Sexuality* appear straight after a section titled ‘Sexual Use of the Mucous Membranes of the Lips and Mouth,’ a section which is primarily about the ‘*feeling of disgust*’.<sup>66</sup> Sartre may well have been sleeping with Freud’s writings on sexuality in December 1939. The philosopher certainly demonstrates an interest in sexuality some years prior to writing *Qu’est-ce qu’un collaborateur?* In the diaries Sartre writes that ‘*the child who holds back his faeces in order to enjoy the pleasure of excretion*’ has ‘*no means of guessing that he has an anus, nor that this anus presents a similarity with the holes into which – immediately – he seeks to put his fingers*’.<sup>67</sup> The hole precedes the anus-hole. The fascination with the posterior opening is not a fascination with the posterior but with its holeness. The hole ‘*is first and foremost what is not*’.<sup>68</sup> The hole is negation. The hole opens us to nothingness. There is nothing there in the hole. The hole is a nonentity. The hole as ‘not’ attracts us, ‘*the vertiginous thrill of the hole comes from the fact that it*

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<sup>64</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, *War Diaries: Notebooks from a Phoney War 1939-40*, Trans. Quintin Hoare (London: Verso, 1999), p.149.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> Sigmund Freud, *On Sexuality*, Trans. James Strachey, (London: Penguin, 1991), pp.63-64.

<sup>67</sup> Sartre, *War Diaries*, p.149.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid. p.150.



*proposes annihilation, it rescues from facticity*'.<sup>69</sup> The hole takes us out of the world. We go from something to nothing. In this sense suicide is a becoming *hole*. The person who commits suicide holes themselves. They become an absence in the world. This attraction for the hole is 'accompanied by repulsion and anguish'. The thought of escape into the infinite *not* is tempered by the love of life. We abject the hole in order to continue to be.

Sartre removes the hole from a discourse about sexuality but the hole is not placed outside gender. The hole often resists, '*it must be forced, in order to pass through*' and as such '*it is already feminine*'.<sup>70</sup> The hole is modest. This is why '*it attracts sexuality*'.<sup>71</sup> The act of poking into a hole '*is rape, breaking-in, negation*'.<sup>72</sup> The hole is feminine, although here femininity is not passive for Sartre, femininity is equated with resistance. The hole is described as a '*nocturnal female organ of nature, skylight to Nothingness, symbol of chaste and violated refusals, mouth of shadows which engulfs or assimilates*'.<sup>73</sup> The hole is poetry. It seems to form part of the poetic language Sartre describes in *What is Literature?* It is a '*mirror of the world*'.<sup>74</sup> The hole is a nothing that Sartre fills with images of the world. The word is a mirror which the poet passes reflections in front of. Here Sartre passes reflections across the word-hole. All mirrors are holes and all holes are mirrors. The mirror which had *nothing* to reflect – which reflected *nothing* – would not be. It would become *the* hole. The hole beneath holes. Sartre never knows the hole – his writing always already fills the hole – the word 'hole' is a hole cover. To see a 'hole' and know it as such is to fill it up, to *not* its *notness*. To describe the hole is to make it *something*. The word without image within or sign without would be *the* hole; the impossible word that would word nothingness without destroying it.

In the *War Diaries* the sexual hole is the vagina. The anus-hole if it is sought out for sexual pleasures is therefore a pseudo-vagina. A man who desires another man's hole actually desires a man-woman's hole. The poking into a hole is '*pre-sexual*' but the hole is always already sexed.<sup>75</sup> There seems to be a tension in these passages around holes and

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid. p.151.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid. Sartre goes on to say that breaking into a hole is not solely a violation but also a fulfillment. To plug a hole is to make good a lack, to achieve a feeling of plenitude, a sense of wholeness.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid. p.152.

<sup>74</sup> Sartre, *What is Literature?*, p.6. By filling the hole Sartre is, of course, asserting his masculinity.

<sup>75</sup> Sartre, *War Diaries*, p.149.

sexuality. Sartre writes of the hole taking on sexual significance only at a secondary level when the hole becomes '*the basic layer of signification for the various species of sexual hole*' but then finds holes innately feminine because of their quality of modesty.<sup>76</sup> The hole hides 'nothing' from us. It resists giving up this nothingness, hence we poke it or peer into it. We coax it into revealing what it hides. Nothingness is therefore, by extension, also feminine. Woman is *not* in Sartre's world. Or woman *is* only as resistance, as a refusal to reveal the nothingness concealed behind the modesty. Resistance – like collaboration – is feminine. It differs from collaboration in that it is active; even in the appearing passivity of reticence. Modesty resists exorbitance. The collaborator and the resistor are both similar and different. What is certain is that in the *War Diaries* Sartre represses the possibility that a same sex hole might be fucked.

### On the Muscle

The unease Sartre's writings manifest about sexuality should be understood as evidence of a more general malaise about masculinity that arose in the inter-war years. Céline (an epigraph from whose *L'Église* prefaces Sartre's *Nausea*), displays a similar unease about homosexuality in his pamphlets. The homosexual in the pamphlets is invariably Jewish. Céline believes the Jews subjugate those around them through acts of anal-penetration. As Thomas C. Spears writes, for Céline the Jew is '*the most frightening incarnation of power: a menacing (negroid) phallus capable of relegating the Aryan, the Jew's victim and prey, to a position of subservience*'.<sup>77</sup> In *L'école des cadavres* Céline quotes from a letter he supposedly received from an angry Jewish reader, '*Les Youtres te déplanquent dans le trou du cul et si tu veux te faire enculer, tu n'as qu'à nous avertir*'.<sup>78</sup> For Céline the Jew poses a threat to his masculinity. Having his hole filled by another man would be a form of emasculation. Céline is too 'modest' to acknowledge that there is nothing in his hole; that he is already a woman although his very desire to resist the

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<sup>76</sup> Ibid. p.151.

<sup>77</sup> Thomas C. Spear 'Virility and the Jewish 'Invasion' in Céline's Pamphlets,' in Eds. Rosemarie Scullion, Philip. H. Solomon & Thomas C. Spear, *Céline and the Politics of Difference*, (Hanover: University Press of New England), p.99.

<sup>78</sup> '*The Yids will reveal you through your arsehole and if you want to get fucked, you just have to let us know*'. Céline, *L'école des cadavres*, p.17.



exploration of his hole suggests this. The women that Céline admires are not passive, unlike the man-woman Sartre describes in *Qu'est-ce qu'un collaborateur?* Céline likes strong women, women who are not women within the parameters of femininity that Sartre sets out in his essay on collaboration. These are women who might rather be understood as women-men. Céline expresses a preference for muscular, puissant women. This fascination is manifested as early as Céline's first novel when Bardamu recollects his former lover Molly, he remembers '*her kindness as if it were yesterday, and her long, blond, magnificently strong, lithe legs, noble legs*'.<sup>79</sup> In *Mort à Crédit* there is an episode in which the young Bardamu is waylaid on his way to boarding-school by a street vendor called Gwendoline who wants to make love to him, he describes her as not '*ugly looking...she had charm in her way, even a kind of elegance...She had an ass on her and muscular thighs and cute little boobies*'.<sup>80</sup> He adds later that she '*could take care of herself, she was built like a wrestler, she would have turned me like a pancake if I'd started getting real mean!*'.<sup>81</sup> This preoccupation carries on in the pamphlets. In *Bagatelles pour un massacre* there is a depiction of the young Russian agent called Nathalie who was assigned to guide Céline during his visit to the Soviet Union: '*Physiquement, elle était mignonne, une balte, solide, ferme, une blonde, des muscles comme son caractère, trempés*'.<sup>82</sup>

Céline likes women of steel; he likes tempered, hardened bodies. Making sense of this desire is difficult. It might be argued that Céline fulfils the characteristic disposition that Sartre finds in the collaborator; he is a woman-man but wants a man-woman instead of a straight man. Céline is in denial. Is the strong woman necessarily a man-woman though? In her book about women's bodybuilding *Bodymakers*, Leslie Heywood believes the woman bodybuilder<sup>83</sup> to be neither man nor woman, female bodybuilders show how '*contradictions – between, for instance, hard bodies and soft ones; masculine bodies and*

<sup>79</sup> Louis-Ferdinand Céline, *Journey to the End of the Night*, Trans. Ralph Manheim, (London: Calder, 1997), p.206.

<sup>80</sup> Louis-Ferdinand Céline, *Death on Credit*, Trans. Ralph Manheim, (London: Calder, 1989), p.214.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid. p.215. There are several other examples of Céline's fixation in the book, amongst them there is a maid whom Bardamu confesses to liking, described as having '*an ass so muscular it was almost square*' (p.490) and another woman portrayed as having done hard labour that '*had given her biceps that were no joke...they looked like hams*' (p.494).

<sup>82</sup> '*Physically she was cute, a Balt, a blonde, hefty, firm, with muscles like her personality, steely*' (translation mine). Louis-Ferdinand Céline, *Bagatelles pour un massacre*, (Paris: Denöel, 1937), p.362.

<sup>83</sup> A phenomenon absent during Céline's lifetime but one that would most likely have appealed to him.

*feminine ones; bodies that seem like you can't mess with them and bodies that seem like you can; bodies shaped by hours and hours of hard work or by plastic surgery and bodies that are dull and shapeless and fat; bodies that own and create themselves and bodies that are created by someone and something else; bodies that act upon others and bodies that are acted upon by others; bodies that are made through technology like weights or surgery and bodies that refuse those things – are part of us all, both sides of the equation in us*'.<sup>84</sup> The muscular 'woman' is an undecidable. S/he brings to the surface a series of 'contradictory cultural meanings' such that 'it is impossible to reduce the female body and the femininity associated with it to one particular, natural, unchangeable thing'.<sup>85</sup> S/he cannot be fixed within any of the oppositions or antinomies which are used to account for 'her', rather s/he resists and disorganises them. Céline by desiring muscular women desires neither men nor women but both men and women, or perhaps a set of bodies that remain beyond either category, neither woman nor not-woman. What Céline wants resists pigeonholing. This resistance resists gendering, resists Sartre's gendering of resistance.

Céline craves contour and matter more than sex. It is not breasts or buttocks he likes. Rather it is their texture, their firmness and solidity. He writes of a maid's breasts, 'you can't imagine how hard they were...The more you shook them, the harder they got...They were solid rock'.<sup>86</sup> It would be possible to read this hardness as a fetish, a stand-in produced to make good the lack, the threat of castration. The firmness is a substitute for the mother's penis.<sup>87</sup> Muscles are pseudo-penises. Such a reading, whilst certainly a possibility; is not, however, obligatory. The desire for flesh that stands out, for hard bodies, might equally be interpreted as a desire for androgyny (despite the usual equation of hardness with masculinity, with the erection). Nathalie Gassel suggests that 'une femme athlète superpuissante n'est plus une femme. C'est un mutant, un troisième sexe, une androgyne'.<sup>88</sup> She wishes that her own athletic body 'soit tout entier comme un

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<sup>84</sup> Leslie Heywood, *Bodymakers: A Cultural Anatomy of Women's Bodybuilding*, (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1998), pp.11-12.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid. p.11.

<sup>86</sup> Céline, *Death on Credit*, p.490.

<sup>87</sup> See Sigmund Freud's 'Fetishism' in Sigmund Freud, *On Sexuality*, Trans. James Strachey, (London: Penguin, 1991), pp.351-57.

<sup>88</sup> 'An extremely strong woman athlete is no longer a woman. She is a heteroclite, a third sex, androgynous' (translation my own). Nathalie Gassel, *Musculatures*, (Asnières: Le Cercle, 2001), p.92.



*sexe qui bande*'.<sup>89</sup> The body becomes an erection but not a sexed one, or if it must be sexed then one of a third sex. Céline desires matter first and foremost; he desires a body that has risen above and beyond itself, that has become a second skin resting upon the normative aforeskin. The primary body, the inherited body, the cultural body, the body that is no body, is anybody, the anonymous body, is not the body Céline looks for and at. He likes a cultured body that stands out from itself. The 'sexiness' of these bodies resides not in the sex but in the flesh itself. These are bodies '*a priori en dehors de toutes classifications sexuelles, et entièrement sexués*'.<sup>90</sup> These are bodies that have broken with the cultural template, bodies that push against the expected and the accepted, bodies like that of the woman who cracks '*nuts with her fists...a staggering blow from way up, enough to split the table wide open. The whole work-shop shook...She was quite a number...a former model...I found that out later...The type appealed to me*'.<sup>91</sup> These are bodies that are unexpected. Céline is seduced by the substantial. He desires the body that has definition. He prefers women with profiles. He seeks shape amidst the shapeless and likes women who appear to have given form to their bodies rather than allowing their bodies to be formed for them. These women design their bodies, consciously, unconsciously, or perhaps not at all, perhaps solely in the mind of the author. Design is a practice of outlining, a production of contours.<sup>92</sup> Céline likes women with curves, women with lines. His is a passion for circumscription.

Céline's love of contours is motivated by the fear of a loss of contour. The muscular body has a certainty to it which Céline enjoys seeing. He appreciates the integrity of these bodies. They are inviolate. They provide '*a demarcation between outside and in that you can rely on*'.<sup>93</sup> Céline, however, lives in constant fear of corporeal violation, of having the boundaries of his body broken, intruded upon by another. He is afraid of losing his edge. This is what motivates him to take pleasure in outlines. He likes to appreciate bodies, but from a distance. Céline's pleasures are often scopophilic. The recurring theme of voyeurism in his writings originates in this wish to savour the

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<sup>89</sup> She wishes that her body '*was wholly like a hard member*' (translation mine). Ibid. p.55.

<sup>90</sup> These are bodies '*before all else, outside of any sexing although entirely sexuate*' (translation my own). Ibid. p.46.

<sup>91</sup> Louis-Ferdinand Céline, *Death on Credit*, p.158.

<sup>92</sup> For a discussion on design as outline see Michael Baxandall, *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth-Century Italy*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974), pp.139-141.

boundaries of bodies rather than breach them. His love of ballet derives from the possibility of seeing shapely women from a distance.<sup>94</sup> The temptation to touch the body and break with the bodily integrity that is guaranteed by separation is removed. Penetrative sex is a two becoming one. It involves the temporary sacrifice of identity. As Leo Bersani writes, sex involves a '*self shattering and solipsistic jouissance*'.<sup>95</sup> Céline's fear of the selfless act of sex manifests itself in his phobia of being fucked in the anus. Bersani writes that in anal sex the one who is penetrated embraces '*the suicidal ecstasy of being a woman*'.<sup>96</sup> If woman is taken to be 'nothing' - as Sartre intimates she 'is' - then this ecstasy is the ecstasy of a touching nothingness, of a becoming nothing, or perhaps of an unbecoming. Céline however wishes to remain something. He will not be fucked. He wants to be a man. He asserts his manhood through his writing.

Both Céline and Sartre find the man who likes men seductive. Céline locates this seductiveness in their writings. He understood most writing to be written in a dead language, one which seduced through illusion. Its ruse was in its over-ornamentation. Céline illustrates this kind of attraction by deception through the imagined response of the literary critic Yves Gandon to a piece of contemporary writing. Gandon is impressed by '*...d'ornements indicibles en cascades exquis...de passages sublimes en plus sublimes encore...en chutes vertigineuses...ces textes de maîtrise ...littéralement magiques se révèlent ruisselants d'apports infinis esthétiques...*'.<sup>97</sup> As Céline demonstrates, the text proves irresistible:

*Gandon, lui-même transposé cependant, par la foi qui l'embrase, n'en peut plus...Il se rend!...Il se donne!...Il nous adjure à son secours. Ah! Vite! Agissons,*

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<sup>93</sup> Heywood, *Bodymakers*, p.16.

<sup>94</sup> Rosemarie Scullion provides an insightful reading of Céline's love of ballerinas. See her essay 'Choreographing Sexual Difference,' in *Céline and the Politics of Difference*, pp.140-168.

<sup>95</sup> Leo Bersani, 'Is the Rectum a Grave?,' in *AIDS: Cultural Analysis / Cultural Criticism*, Ed. Douglas Crimp, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1988), p.222. For Bersani the sodomist and the traitor cannot be intimate as they are '*excluded from all triumphant communities,*' and are therefore '*reduced, or elevated, to a kind of objectless or generalized ejaculation, a fucking of the world rather than each other*'. Leo Bersani, *Homos*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), p.166.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid. p.212. Jane Gallop, on the other hand, reads anal intercourse as an act during which sexual difference is denied. Gallop, *Thinking through the Body*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), p.67.

<sup>97</sup> Gandon is impressed by '*an exquisite stream of indescribable embellishments...passages that become more and more sublime...vertiginous cadences...these masterful pieces...are literally magical, a revelatory flow of incalculable aesthetic contributions...*' (translation mine). Céline, *Bagatelles pour un massacre*, p.162.



*assistons! Soutenons Gandon!...Prévenons le pire! Devançons quelque atroce dénouement...Pitié! Détaillons! Partageons son exstase! L'humanité le commande! Courage! Vaillance! Pour lui tout seul, c'est bien simple s'il insiste, s'il s'obstine! C'est la mort! Dans les phrases! Par les phrases! Trépassé de beauté!...de Beauté phrasuleuse! Gandon! Ah!*<sup>98</sup>

The critic, the reader, dies in the pleasure of reading, a little death. In the instant of orgasm – in the ‘ah’ – Gandon comes to be language. The one seduced becomes a part of the seduction. This ejaculatory reading is an unmanning.

Gandon is unmanned by a dead language. His is a necrophiliac pleasure in the text. The text which so impresses him is produced by writers who are enjuivé. It is written in *‘français juif a bachots, français d’Anatole l’enjuivé, le français goncourt, le français déguelasse d’élégance, moulé, oriental, onctueux, glissant comme la merde, c’est l’épitaphe de la race français’*.<sup>99</sup> Gandon gets off on reading a tombstone or worse, he couples with a corpse, Céline also describes contemporary literature as *‘bien plus morte que la mort’*.<sup>100</sup> Sartre shared the belief that the critics were people who had *‘found a quiet little job as cemetery watchmen,’* but here not because they read dead language but instead because they read writers who were literally rather than literarily dead.<sup>101</sup> For Céline, writing itself is dead. It is deader than death. The reader dies into it in a self-shattering literary copulation. The vertiginous elements of the text that impress Gandon and lead him on evoke the *‘vertiginous thrill of annihilation that is black magic,’* the thrill that is the hole.<sup>102</sup> The reader does not fill or satisfy the hole but is filled and satisfied by it. The reader is holed.

Céline describes these kinds of readers, the readers who cannot resist reading, as robots.<sup>103</sup> The robotization of the individual is a phenomenon that Hannah Arendt

<sup>98</sup> *‘Gandon, transformed in the interim, inflamed by the dedication, cannot take it any longer...He surrenders!...He gives himself!...He begs us to help him. Ah! Quick! Do something, help! Hold on Gandon!...Expect the worst! Anticipate a grisly end...Mercy! We want all the details! Let’s share the climax! Humanity demands it! Hang in there! Be brave! It’s easy, the choice is his, either he does or he doesn’t! It’s death! In language! By language! Overcome by beauty!...by linguistic Beauty! Gandon! Ah!’* (translation my own). Ibid.

<sup>99</sup> It is written in *‘Jewish high-school French, Anatole the Jewified French, Goncourt French, French that is disgustingly elegant, calligraphic, exotic, unctuous, slippery as shit, it’s the epitaph of the French race’* (translation mine). Ibid. p.167.

<sup>100</sup> Contemporary literature is *‘much more dead than death’*. Ibid. p.172.

<sup>101</sup> Sartre, *What is Literature?*, p.17.

<sup>102</sup> Sartre, *War Diaries*, p.151.

<sup>103</sup> Céline, *Bagatelles pour un massacre*, p.167.

discusses in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. It is symptomatic of the increasing magnetism the mass has for the individual. It marks the disappearance of the individual into the mass. Robotization was a product of the nationalization of man, it arrived when the belief arose that the divine origin of man had become bound to the nation.<sup>104</sup> The rise of mass movements leads to a situation in which '*the difference between ends and means evaporates together with the personality, and the result is the monstrous immorality of ideological politics*'.<sup>105</sup> The flow of the mass movements is reminiscent of Sartre's collaborator (who is carried along by the tide of history) except that no reversal of principles is involved. The mass is unprincipled.

### Paper Cuts

For Céline most contemporary authors are afraid of direct emotional contact with their readership. Emotion is perceived by these authors to cause certain death. It is a social disease to be avoided at all costs. They avoid encountering emotion by hiding underwater in diving suits, only communicating with the social surface by way of microphones.<sup>106</sup> These authors are either Jewish or Jewified. The Jew is afraid of real emotion '*comme le serpent de la mangouste*'.<sup>107</sup> One of the few authors to believe he can confront real emotion is, of course, Céline. His hate is obvious in the pamphlets, as is his fear. Sartre writes of the author's anti-Semitism:

*Look at Céline: his vision of the universe is catastrophic. The Jew is everywhere, the earth is lost, it is up to the Aryan not to compromise, never to make peace. Yet he must be on his guard: if he breathes, he has already lost his purity, for the very air that penetrates his bronchial tubes is contaminated. Does that not read like a diatribe by a Manichean? If Céline supported the socialist theses of the Nazis, it was because he was paid to do so. At the bottom of his heart he did not believe in them. For him there is no solution except collective suicide, nonreproduction, death.*<sup>108</sup>

<sup>104</sup> See Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, (San Diego: Harcourt, 1994), p.234.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid. p.249.

<sup>106</sup> Céline, *Bagatelles pour un massacre*, p.168.

<sup>107</sup> 'The Jew is afraid of real emotion like the snake of the mongoose' (translation mine). Ibid. p.183.

<sup>108</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, *Anti-Semite and Jew: An Exploration of the Etiology of Hate*, Trans. George J. Becker, (New York: Schocken Books, 1995), p.41.



These comments provoked Céline's fury when they were published in 1946, not because he was labeled an anti-Semite but because Sartre accused him of being paid to write the pamphlets. Sartre is right that for Céline the Jew is all pervasive. The Jew is everywhere and nowhere.<sup>109</sup> This is because the mark of his difference is invisible. '*He is a white man, and, apart from some rather debatable characteristics, he can sometimes go unnoticed*'.<sup>110</sup> This ability for the Jew to pass as an Aryan might be what prompts Céline's desperate efforts to 'colour' him. Céline's fear, however, may not just be because of the perpetual possibility of encountering the Jew. Earlier I suggested Céline's love of the shapely body, the hardened flesh, did not necessarily need to be understood as a form of fetishism, as a means of warding off the fear of castration. It is clear however that the author does manifest castration anxiety in the pamphlets. Spear notes that the Jews for Céline present '*the frightful spectre of his own castration (circumcision) and mirror his own persecution complex but are also worthy of his envy because of the virile force of mastery and influence that they represent for him and that he clearly seeks for himself*'.<sup>111</sup> Céline at once fears the Jews and admires them. He was himself circumcised.<sup>112</sup>

Freud writes about the connection that exists between circumcision and the fear of castration in footnotes to the case study of Little Hans (1909) and the essay on Leonardo da Vinci (1910).<sup>113</sup> In a footnote to 'Little Hans' Freud analyses Otto Weininger's hatred of Jews and women. An Austrian Jew, Weininger wrote the once influential *Sex and Character* in which he proposes that femininity and Jewishness are profoundly linked.<sup>114</sup> Weininger killed himself in the same year that it was published. Freud writes that

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<sup>109</sup> The critic Paul Vandromme writes that the Jew is not just everywhere and nowhere in Céline, the Jew is also something and nothing: '*Céline utilise le mot juif sans savoir ce qu'il signifie au juste. Il commet même à son propos tant de méprises qu'il ne signifie plus rien*'. '*Céline uses the word Jew without knowing exactly what it means. He commits so many mistakes in regard to it that it comes to signify nothing at all*'. Vandromme, *Louis-Ferdinand Céline*, (Paris: Éditions Universitaires, 1963), p.77.

<sup>110</sup> Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, Trans. Charles Lam Markmann, (New York: Grove Press, 1967), p.115.

<sup>111</sup> Spear, 'Virility and the Jewish "Invasion" in the Pamphlets,' in *Céline and the Politics of Difference*, p.110.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid. p.109.

<sup>113</sup> See Sigmund Freud, 'Analysis of a Phobia in a Five-Year-Old Boy ('Little Hans'),' in Sigmund Freud, *Case Histories I*, (London: Penguin, 1990), pp.169-305., and Sigmund Freud, 'Leonardo da Vinci and a Memory of his Childhood,' in Sigmund Freud, *Art and Literature*, (London: Penguin, 1990), pp.151-231.

<sup>114</sup> For a short discussion of *Sex and Character* see Eric L. Santner, *My Own Private Germany: Daniel Paul Schreber's Secret History of Modernity*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), pp.108-110.

Weininger, whom he identifies as a neurotic, was ‘*completely under the sway of his infantile complexes; and from that standpoint what is common to Jews and women is their relation to the castration complex*’.<sup>115</sup> The Jewish male is related to the castration complex through circumcision, it is ‘*the deepest unconscious root of anti-semitism; for even in the nursery little boys hear that a Jew has something cut off his penis – a piece of his penis, they think – and this gives them the right to despise Jews*’.<sup>116</sup> Céline, like Weininger, despises the Jews and although not Jewish himself he shares the mark of Jewishness with the Austrian. Either for aesthetic or hygienic reasons, Céline was circumcised, a rare occurrence outside of Judaism in France at that time. Céline cannot ignore the religious connotations inscribed upon his body (he is incapable of overlooking the Jew in him). His hatred of the Jews is a hatred of himself. His fear of the Jews is a fear of the cut he shares with them. He seeks to paper over his exposed glans with writing, to ‘uncircumcise’ his self, to make good his lack and restore his racial purity. It is through hatred that he cultivates a new skin.

Céline’s preoccupation with the circumcised prepuce is emphasized by Kristeva in *Powers of Horror*. She provides an example from *Le Beaux Draps* to illustrate this,<sup>117</sup> but references to circumcision are plentiful in the pamphlets. Céline believes that ‘*si Bergson n’était pas coupé, si Proust n’était que breton, si Freud n’avait pas la marque...on en parlerait ni des uns ni des autres...*’.<sup>118</sup> He states that ‘*les Juifs circoncis sont en train de châtrer l’Aryen de son rythme émotif naturel*’.<sup>119</sup> This written by a marked man. How is Céline’s articulation of hatred towards the Jews influenced by his own affinity with them? Perhaps this affinity is manifested by the way Céline hides it. He desires bodies that stand out, that are well-defined, whilst he conceals his own body which he feels to be incomplete. The cut has compromised his contours. The cut has created a hole in his identity. He feels himself, his self, incomplete. The writings are journeys into this hole. He uses language to try and fill it. Sartre’s eagerness to make good his holes could be seen as similar to Céline’s, both writers share a perceived lack. In

<sup>115</sup> Freud, ‘Analysis of a Phobia in a Five-Year-Old Boy (‘Little Hans’),’ in *Case Histories I*, pp.198-99.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid. p.198.

<sup>117</sup> Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, p.182.

<sup>118</sup> ‘*If Bergson was not cut, if Proust was only Breton, if Freud did not have the mark...we would not speak of any one of them...*’ (translation mine). Céline, *Bagatelles pour un massacre*, p.66.



this context the child's need to expel faeces which Sartre understands to be motivated solely by the '*pleasure of excretion*,'<sup>120</sup> might also be a manifestation of the need to create a '*phallus with which the infantile imagination provides the feminine sex*'.<sup>121</sup> The hole is therefore correctly identified with the feminine by Sartre but not because of its modesty, rather for what it is *not*, it is not the penis, it lacks. Filling the hole means making it whole. Sartre's writing is filler.

### The horror, the horror

The collaborator for Sartre functions in a similar way to the Jew for Céline, both are holes which these writers fill with their personal anxieties and with the anxiety of an age. The fact that the Jew is a form of figuration does not mitigate Céline's actions. The Jew can, in one sense, never be anything more than a ceaseless figuring but this kind of reading ignores the Jews outside the text, those who must live with its effects. We do not live our lives as metaphors.<sup>122</sup> It is not enough to say that Céline writes out his fears rather than acting upon them. Writing is a doing; it is '*sensuous human activity*'.<sup>123</sup> It is a practice. When Karl Marx writes that '*the philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point is to change it*,'<sup>124</sup> he writes that. He invites change through writing. He changes through writing. The moment Feuerbach, Hegel or Marx put their interpretations to paper, form their characters, their words, they move across and within the world-stage. Sartre in making a distinction between the prose-writer and the poet writes that '*there is nothing in common between these two acts of writing except the movement of the hand which traces the letters*'.<sup>125</sup> It is this movement that moves the world. It is the way the hand advance across the page, the turns it performs, that at least partially governs the outcome of its gestures. Does it write in hate or love? Spontaneously or pensively? Does the hand and the pen it guides (or the pen that guides it) ever look

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<sup>119</sup> '*The circumcised Jew is in the process of castrating the natural emotional rhythm of the Aryan*'. Ibid. p.191.

<sup>120</sup> Sartre, *War Diaries*, p.149.

<sup>121</sup> Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, p.71.

<sup>122</sup> Even if *I* is ultimately always a metaphor for the impossibility of ever being *me*.

<sup>123</sup> Karl Marx, 'Concerning Feuerbach,' in Karl Marx, *Early Writings*, Trans. Rodney Livingstone & Gregor Benton, (London: Penguin, 1992), p.421.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid. p.423.

<sup>125</sup> Sartre, *What is Literature?*, p.10.

back, ever return to try and undo what has already been done? The author must be responsible for the movement of the hand, whatever he writes. We must not cut off the hand that writes for us, we must not think of the writer as a '*hand, cut off from any voice*'. Céline had a hand in what he wrote.

Céline and Sartre are collaborators in a project designed to assuage their anxieties about identity. They allow the margins of society to bear the burden of their fears, the homosexual, the Jew, the homosexual Jew. To identify the impulses that underlie these writings does not assist us in gauging the role of the writing itself in the communication of extreme sentiments though. How much are the words to blame? Can writing work against the words that form it? Can it fight the content that it is? In his lecture *Leçons*, Barthes recommended reading Céline because of the '*travail de déplacement qu'il exerce sur la langue*'.<sup>126</sup> Céline produces shifts in emphasis within language, moves things around, makes words mean in new and different ways...he is a language shaker. This work of displacement is a force of freedom within language and exists independently of the politics of the author.<sup>127</sup> Barthes, displaying the growing influence of Kristeva's work upon his own, states that language is its own politics and the best way to engage with its politics is on the plane of language, '*non par le message dont elle est l'instrument, mais par le jeu des mots dont elle est le théâtre*'.<sup>128</sup> In *Leçons*, the agency of the author has increased substantially. The author finds a new lease of life. With the help of the author – an author who pays attention to style as much as subject-matter – writing can resist itself. Style can subvert subject-matter. Language is not exhausted by the meaning it effects, '*elle peut survivre à ce message et faire entendre en lui, dans une résonance souvent terrible, autre chose que ce qu'il dit*'.<sup>129</sup> Writing can challenge the words that constitute it. It does this through style. Style for Céline is '*une émotion, d'abord, avant tout, par-dessus tout*'.<sup>130</sup> He adds that style is 'music'. The writing that resists has rhythm and feeling. Barthes's discussion of displacement in language is drawn from works like *La*

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<sup>126</sup> The '*work of displacement he exercises on language*'. Roland Barthes, *Leçons*, (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1978), p.17.

<sup>127</sup> Ibid.

<sup>128</sup> '*Not by the message for which it is the medium, but by the word play for which it is the stage*'. Ibid. pp.16-17.

<sup>129</sup> '*Language can survive the meaning it carries and make audible in it, through an often terrifying echo, something other than what it says*'. Ibid. pp.13-14.



*révolution du langage poétique*.<sup>131</sup> In *La révolution du langage poétique*, Kristeva describes how an unstable thetic (often the product of a resistance to the discovery of castration<sup>132</sup>) tends to remove language from its symbolic function (sign-syntax) and then exhibit it in a semiotic articulation through a material support such as the voice, ‘*this semiotic network gives “music” to literature*’.<sup>133</sup> The thetic phase is the period when the child takes up a *position* within language; it marks the break that produces subject and object.<sup>134</sup> It is the moment in which the gap is instituted that makes enunciation possible. An unstable thetic is a thetic that is troubled by the drives and their articulations, by the semiotic. This musical troubling of the symbolic is only relative, ‘*the thetic continues to ensure the position of the subject put in process/on trial*’.<sup>135</sup>

The position of the subject is maintained by the thetic but the irruption of the semiotic within the symbolic places the subject *en procès*. Poetic language ‘*puts the subject in process/on trial through a network of marks and semiotic facilitations*’.<sup>136</sup> If Céline employs poetic language in the pamphlets then he courts desubjectification (without ever quite achieving his aim) through the displacements that he creates within his writings, the openings he provides for the semiotic to erupt into the symbolic. He attempts annihilation through writing – seeks to murder his self (*sui caedes*) – but the thetic constantly rescues him. He cannot reach the end of the night, just journey towards it. Only death could bring him to this end, to the heart of darkness. This is what Joseph Conrad’s Kurtz glimpsed in his final moments, when he ‘*cried in a whisper at some image, at some vision – he cried out twice, a cry that was no more than a breath: “The horror! The horror!”*’.<sup>137</sup> The horror is the night. Horror is the abject.<sup>138</sup> For Kristeva ‘*abjection preserves what existed in the archaism of pre-objectal relationship, in the immemorial violence with which a body becomes separated from another body in order*

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<sup>130</sup> ‘For Céline style is *first of all, before all else, above all, an emotion*’. Céline, *Bagatelles pour un massacre*, p.164.

<sup>131</sup> Julia Kristeva, *La révolution de langage poétique*, (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1974).

<sup>132</sup> Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, p.63.

<sup>133</sup> Ibid.

<sup>134</sup> Ibid. p.43.

<sup>135</sup> Ibid. p.63.

<sup>136</sup> Ibid. p.58.

<sup>137</sup> Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, (New York: Dover Publications, 1990), p.64.

<sup>138</sup> Abjection is linked to the thetic in that it is what makes the thetic break possible. It is the process of separation that makes the mirror-phase and the identification of the subject and its object possible.

to be – maintaining the night in which the outline of the signified thing vanishes and where only the imponderable affect is carried out'.<sup>139</sup> Abjection mediates the subject's relationship with its impossible origin. In the absence of such mediation the subject would cease to be. The vision Kurtz has is of having no vision, he sees darkness, the unseeing I. He sees his *self* ending.

Céline was one of Arendt's surplus men – '*the scum of the big cities*'<sup>140</sup> – who went to Africa because in Europe they were merely '*human debris*,' a body of '*superfluous working power*'.<sup>141</sup> He came from the unemployed edge of the community which in the Sartrean schema would give him good credentials for becoming a collaborator. His *Journey to the End of the Night* mirrors Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1902), the novel of which a reading enabled Arendt to reveal the nature of those men who formed the bulk of the European exodus to Africa.<sup>142</sup> Africa was, for the scrambling European, a world without accepted social values. It was a breeding ground for the oppressive personality, men for whom '*the only talent that could possibly burgeon in their hollow souls was the gift of fascination which makes a splendid leader of an extreme party*'.<sup>143</sup> In this environment members of high society and criminal elements were fused together such that a refined atmosphere developed around wrongdoing. For the criminal, this '*refinement, the very contrast between the brutality of the crime and the manner of carrying it out, becomes the bridge of deep understanding between himself and the perfect gentleman*'.<sup>144</sup> Crime develops a veneer of civility in colonial Africa. It disassembles. In this deceit that lends it its abject quality it is similar to collaboration. Imperialism – the building of an Empire – took men outside the boundaries of a familiar culture with inherent (if unnoticed) rites of purification and longstanding classifications of concrete and moral forms of defilement into a world without bounds. It left the subject open to the abject. It is out of this environment that Céline's ideology of hate may have originated. In the pamphlets the Jew is often equated with the African: '*Le Juif est un nègre, la race sémite n'existe pas, c'est une invention de franc-maçon, le Juif n'est que le*

<sup>139</sup> Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, p.10.

<sup>140</sup> Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, p.151.

<sup>141</sup> Ibid. p.150.

<sup>142</sup> Ibid. p.189.

<sup>143</sup> Ibid.

<sup>144</sup> Ibid. p.190.



*produit d'un croisement de nègres et de barbares asiates*'.<sup>145</sup> He is nothing but '*une perpetuelle brute en tam-tam*'.<sup>146</sup> Céline does not always conceive of the Africans in negative terms though, he writes of the Africans whose presence upsets him in France that:

*En Afrique, chez les mêmes nègres, ou leurs cousins, au Cameroun, j'ai vécu des années seul, dans un de leurs villages, en pleine forêt, sous la même pailotte, à la mêmealebasse. En Afrique, c'était des braves gens. Ici, ils me gênent, ils m'écourent.*<sup>147</sup>

Everything must be in its place. The Africans are fine in Africa but not in France. They must not exist at the centre of Céline's world, only at its margins. They are his constitutive outside, an outside that the Jews are also supposed to embody. In Céline's world the Jews do not know their place, which is to be 'out of place'. In journeying to Africa Céline '*had not stepped out of society but had been spat out by it,*' abjected.<sup>148</sup> As the solitary Frenchman he was gifted an identity. His identity was secured, surrounded as he was by the other. On his return to France he became one amongst many, all the same. The African in France occupies a similar position to the one Céline once did, they become the singular individual who stands out. Unlike Céline however they are not in a position of presumed superiority but must endure being perceived as inferior. Céline dislikes the African in France because he envies them. He dislikes the Jew because whilst at one level he cannot distinguish himself from them (he is circumcised) at another he cannot be at one with them. He is not Jewish. His envy of the Jew – whilst provoking his resentment – manifests his desire to be at one with the Jew, to become Jew. Whilst he is a part of society in France he feels apart from society. He feels he does not belong. He is alone.

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<sup>145</sup> '*The Jew is a nigger, the Semitic race doesn't exist, it was invented by the freemasons, the Jew is just the result of interbreeding between niggers and Asian savages*'. Céline, *Bagatelles pour un massacre*, pp.191-92.

<sup>146</sup> He is nothing but '*an eternal beast in tom-toms*'. Ibid. p.186.

<sup>147</sup> '*In Africa with the same blacks, or their relatives, in Cameroon, I lived alone for years, in one of their villages, in the middle of the forest, under the same straw-roof, sharing the same gourd. In Africa they are decent people. Its over here that they get on my nerves, that they disgust me*'. Ibid. pp.202-03.

<sup>148</sup> Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, p.189.

Céline's loneliness exhibits itself in his increasing use of the three points of suspension...holes in writing which hold a nothingness. Sartre wrote a passage that is important for making sense of these holes...:

*The abyss is a hole, it proposes engulfment. And engulfment always always attracts, as a nihilation which would be its own foundation. Of course, attraction for a hole is accompanied by repulsion and anguish. But the hole's nothingness is coloured: it's a black nothingness, which causes another nature to intervene here, another cardinal category – Night.*<sup>149</sup>

The black hole offers a journey into the night. It is the apocalypse. The hole...is the hole we all have within the Self...even as we think of ourselves as whole. The hole is the negated ground of the I; the sty that torments it. It is the before of our becoming. The *'one story the "I" cannot tell is the story of its own emergence as an "I"'*.<sup>150</sup> The 'I' in any story (and Céline's is no exception) *'constitutes a point of opacity and, indeed, in that sense, constitutes an interruption of sequence, a break in the narrative, the eruption of the non-narrativizable in the midst of the story'*.<sup>151</sup> The 'I' is figured through the ellipses...the breaks in Céline's narrative. The points of suspension represent the ripples that cloud the reflection of Narcissus in the pond, *'that muddle its bed,'*<sup>152</sup> the dots demonstrate that the *'more or less beautiful image in which I behold or recognize myself rests upon an abjection that sunders it as soon as repression, the constant watchman, is relaxed'*.<sup>153</sup> The holes suggest I am not whole. They call to mind Sartre's conception of the *Being-for-Itself* when a person places himself at a distance from someone or something else so he can acknowledge their alterity and in the same instant generate the 'gap' that is freedom. There is emptiness and anguish in this action. The hole denotes the internalization of this act. I acknowledge I am other than I, that I exist as and through a gap. The matter that is me is not. There is no gap in that this experience of separating that made me is within me still. To acknowledge what was left behind but is still before me would be to end me. The (M)Other that I rejected to become Self cannot be known to me.

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<sup>149</sup> Sartre, *War Diaries*, p.150.

<sup>150</sup> Judith Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself: A Critique of Ethical Violence*, (Assen: Royal Van Gorcum, 2003), p.46. For a review of this see Nicholas Chare, 'You (In)Complete Me,' in *parallax* 33 10:4 (October-December 2004), pp.79-81.

<sup>151</sup> Ibid.

<sup>152</sup> Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, p.14.

<sup>153</sup> Ibid. p.13.



I is condemned to solitude. I must however work to preserve this loneliness that is I. I must continually abject the Mother.

The increasingly secular society in Europe in the early twentieth century led to a breakdown in the efficacy of the religious mechanisms which existed to cathect the abject. In this secular climate the abject encroached upon the individual, imperiled the subject. The loneliness that Arendt describes as a by-product of society's competitive structure might also be understood as symptomatic of a mass identity crisis bought on by a horror that can no longer be pushed aside but instead ferments within. The nothingness kept at the edges of the social now threatens to 'engulf' it from within. The self becomes aware of the separation that founds it; it comes to know it is alone. It knows that it has lost but not what it has lost. Arendt understands totalitarian domination to be founded upon the exploitation of this loneliness, this '*experience of not belonging to the world at all, which is among the most radical and desperate experiences of man*'.<sup>154</sup> Man is cut off from what matters. He lives within the mirror. In loneliness '*self and world*' and the '*capacity for thought and experience*' are lost.<sup>155</sup> This loss is only known by looking to the other for confirmation of it. It is when we are alone in company that we truly learn of our loneliness.<sup>156</sup>

Totalitarianism exploited the loneliness of man in Western Europe. Kristeva is correct to identify '*the "drive-foundations" of fascism*' in abjection.<sup>157</sup> Abjection '*is the economy, one of horror and suffering in their libidinal surplus-value, which has been tapped, rationalized, and made operative by Nazism and Fascism*'.<sup>158</sup> The mass movements offered a form of logic for a society of individuals slipping into psychosis, they offered a sense of belonging and a set of contours. Arendt explains that '*the only capacity of the human mind which needs neither the self nor the other nor the world in order to function safely and which is as independent of experience as it is of thinking is the ability of logical reasoning whose premise is the self-evident*'.<sup>159</sup> National Socialism and the other mass movements give the human mind a *consistent* set of rules to adhere to

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<sup>154</sup> Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, p.475.

<sup>155</sup> Ibid. p.477.

<sup>156</sup> Ibid.

<sup>157</sup> Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, p.155.

<sup>158</sup> Ibid.

<sup>159</sup> Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, p.477.

and to think by. They provide a logic to keep the individual company. Totalitarianism offers a ‘suicidal escape’ for the individual from their reality of being alone.<sup>160</sup> The mass movement is a closing of space – the destruction of contradictions forming one aspect of this – designed to nullify ‘even the productive potentialities of isolation’.<sup>161</sup> ‘The “ice-cold reasoning” and the “mighty tentacle” of dialectics which “seizes you as in a vise” appears like a last support in a world where nobody is reliable and nothing can be relied upon’.<sup>162</sup> Abjection is the irrational which provides the impulse to rationalize but also offers a means by which to trouble the rational. Céline’s writings develop across this space of support and disruption.

The epigraph from Céline’s *L’Eglise* which prefaces Sartre’s *Nausea* is one which emphasizes the solitude of the individual – ‘*C’est un garçon sans importance collective, c’est tout juste un individu.*’ – existing in a ‘state of absolute desolation’.<sup>163</sup> Kristeva draws attention to this connection with solitude in her chapter on Sartre in *The Sense and Non-Sense of Revolt*. She reads the character of Roquentin in *Nausea* as sending us ‘back to the depressive solitude of the contemporary individual’.<sup>164</sup> This loneliness is ‘rooted in the personal experience of the impossible link to the other that is ultimately the maternal object, although the dissolution of all social links follows from this microuniverse’.<sup>165</sup> A link between abjection and loneliness is implicit in this passage. The personal experience of the impossible link to the mother is one of abjection. The mother is the nothing within the subject which is ‘accessible only in nausea’.<sup>166</sup> The ‘spasms and vomiting that protect me’<sup>167</sup> from the mother are also my most intimate moments with that object.

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<sup>160</sup> Ibid. p.478.

<sup>161</sup> Ibid.

<sup>162</sup> Ibid.

<sup>163</sup> Julia Kristeva, *The Sense and Non-Sense of Revolt: The Powers and Limits of Psychoanalysis*, Trans. Jeanine Herman, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), p.171. The epigraph is spoken by the character Yudenstew in Act 3 of *L’Eglise*. Louis-Ferdinand Céline, *L’Eglise*, (Paris: Denoël et Steele, 1933), p.150. For Roland Barthes the influence of Céline upon Sartre’s writing extends far beyond the use of a single epigraph. He writes of Céline: ‘*Beaucoup d’écrivains viennent de lui. A commencer par Sartre. L’écriture de Sartre, ou si l’on veut sa “vision verbalisée,” vibre un peu de la même façon que celle de Céline.*’ ‘Many writers are influenced by him. Sartre to start with. Sartre’s writing, or if you prefer his vision as he expresses it in words, stirs you a little like the way Céline’s does’. Roland Barthes, ‘Réponse à une question sur Céline,’ in Roland Barthes, *Oeuvres complètes 5: 1977-1980*, (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2002), p.1024.

<sup>164</sup> Ibid.

<sup>165</sup> Ibid.

<sup>166</sup> Ibid. p.172.

<sup>167</sup> Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, p.2.



Céline writes towards this nothing, this darkness, approaching the edge of the night. In the pamphlets the figure of the Jew poses a continual threat to Céline's bodily integrity. This occurs at the level of content. At the level of style, Céline enacts the very threat that he claims to be afraid of. He seeks to write himself into the hole out of which he became. He compromises his self. He writes into the twilight, his language carrying him close to '*the place where meaning collapses*'.<sup>168</sup> He writes himself to the brink of psychosis and '*risks the loss of identity*' that accompanies it.<sup>169</sup> The style (when supplemented by a material support such as the voice) permits the reader (and the writer reads) to sample this proximity to psychosis and to become bathed in the attendant semiotic excess. The reader looks through the night to its end but does not touch that end. It is reading on a tightrope, you see the ground but the aim is to keep the relation a specular one. The ground of the self is glimpsed not known. To fall is to die. The reader risks falling in with Céline's style; falling out of self. Kristeva describes what is involved as going beyond '*the content of the novels, the author's biography or his indefensible political stands (fascist, anti-Semitic); the true "miracle" of Céline resides in the very experience of one's reading – it is fascinating, mysterious, intimately nocturnal, and liberating by means of a laughter without complacency yet complicitous*'.<sup>170</sup> The laughter discharges the semiotic. Laughter preserves the self. It is a kind of vomiting.

Céline exposes the beneath of language, the '*substrat infrasignifiant de la langue*'.<sup>171</sup> Signifiante is the '*unceasing operation of the drives toward, in, and through language*'.<sup>172</sup> The drives that carry language and exist as its underside in the everyday are brought to the surface by Céline. He shows us the semiotic; that side to language which has sense without significance. The semiotic is the lining that holds language together and allows for meaning. It is the rhythms of the tongue – the sounds around words – integral to language but also eternally elusive within it. The shimmer of words on a page, the energy within the characters and between them. Literature like that of Céline acts to bring the drives, which are usually clothed by the symbolic, to the forefront of language.

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<sup>168</sup> Ibid. p.2.

<sup>169</sup> Jacques Henric & Julia Kristeva, '*On Céline: Music and the "Blunder"*,' in Julia Kristeva, *Interviews*, Ed. Ross Mitchell Guberman, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), p.232.

<sup>170</sup> Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, p.133.

<sup>171</sup> 'Céline exposes ... the *infrasignifiatory substratum to language*'. Julia Kristeva, *Au Risque de la Pensée*, (La Tour d'Aigues: Éditions de l'Aube, 2001), p.67.

He bares language for us. Perhaps this is what Emmanuel Lévinas meant (without meaning it) when he wrote that it ‘*is the great merit of Céline’s “Journey to the End of the Night”, thanks to a marvelous flair for language, to have undressed the universe in a sad and desperate cynicism*’.<sup>173</sup> Beneath the ostensible calm of the words floating upon the page, there is an immemorial violence at play.

### Like it was going out of style...

In the inter-war years the social mechanisms designed to keep the semiotic from flooding the symbolic (and thereby engulfing culture) were in crisis. The abject (the repressed maternal, the fount of the semiotic) threatened to overwhelm the subject. In *Powers of Horror* Kristeva uses the writings of Céline as the mainstay for her argument that – in the contemporary western world – literature has replaced the sacred as the site where abjection is sublimated. For Kristeva, abjection is a key process during the formation of the subject. It is the action of separation which is a necessary precursor to the mirror-stage. Lacan describes the mirror-stage as a drama ‘*whose internal thrust is precipitated from insufficiency to anticipation*’.<sup>174</sup> The child exists within a somatic maelstrom – a mess of bodily functions – and lives only as its insides. The mirror provides the child with a passport to the outside, the reflection it affords anchors the fragmented body-image to ‘*a form of its totality*’ that exists exterior to it.<sup>175</sup> This is not, however, the first journey the infant undertakes. Lacan does not delve deeply enough into the pre-history of the subject. He accounts for the stage at which the child ‘is’ but ‘is’ only as ‘frustration’, ‘is’ as a body that baffles and bewilders but which is felt as a *singular* insufficiency. I am not up to the task of being me but I know that I am. The child is already a desiring being, a wanting self-sufficiency. The time of maternal plenitude has passed and will shortly become the past.<sup>176</sup> Kristeva seeks to explain how the child

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<sup>172</sup> Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, p.17.

<sup>173</sup> Emmanuel Lévinas, *On Escape*, Trans. Bettina Bergo, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), p.64.

<sup>174</sup> Jacques Lacan, ‘The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I as revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience,’ in *Écrits: A Selection*, Trans. Alan Sheridan, (London: Routledge, 1977), p.4.

<sup>175</sup> Ibid.

<sup>176</sup> Lacan’s description of the child’s entry into a state of anticipation also suggests the beginning of a sense of futurity for the infant. The mirror stage does not solely bring the child outside of itself but also outside of



separates from the mother in order for the mirror-stage to take place; she describes how for the infant prior to the 'that's me in the mirror' of the mirror-stage there must also be a recognition of 'that's not me' in relation to the mother. Abjection '*is a precondition of narcissism*'.<sup>177</sup> '*Even before being like, 'I' am not but do separate, reject, ab-ject*'.<sup>178</sup> Abjection, the series of partial and provisional separations from the mother that make the mirror-stage possible, is repressed by the subject, as not to do so would require it to confront its own brittleness. '*The more or less beautiful image in which I behold or recognize myself rests upon an abjection that sunders it as soon as repression, the constant watchman, is relaxed*'.<sup>179</sup> That abject is a part of us but a part of us that it is dangerous to acknowledge; it is a part of us that must be kept apart, that must be managed. This management role was previously performed by the sacred. Abjection '*accompanies all religious structurings*' and the '*various means of purifying the abject - the various catharses - make up the history of religions*'.<sup>180</sup> In the predominantly secular society that exists in the contemporary Western world, the role of purification falls to the artist. The '*aesthetic task*' in the present '*amounts to retracing the fragile limits of the speaking being, closest to its dawn, to the bottomless 'primacy' constituted by primal repression*'.<sup>181</sup> This is the terrain of the abject, a terrain over which great modern literature unfolds: '*Dostoyevsky, Lautréamont, Proust, Artaud, Kafka, Céline*'.<sup>182</sup>

Céline writes back to the mother out of which he became. He also unwrites the symbolic in the process, therefore opening it up to a possible rewriting. Such a challenge to the symbolic function could potentially lead to psychosis but Céline's texts are '*able to master this latent psychotic state*' through their '*literary devices and writing style*'.<sup>183</sup> Modernist writing, as exemplified by Céline, must of necessity touch the void that is psychosis. The modernist aesthetic functions to sublimate the abject, that which would otherwise destroy the subject through overwhelming the symbolic and rendering the subject psychotic. The abject is that which exceeds the rational; it is the force of unreason

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the present. There is no looking back for the infant once looking forwards and backwards become possibilities, once the reflection has supplemented the child's rhythmic temporality with a linear one.

<sup>177</sup> Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, p.13.

<sup>178</sup> Ibid.

<sup>179</sup> Ibid.

<sup>180</sup> Ibid. p.17.

<sup>181</sup> Ibid. p.18.

<sup>182</sup> Ibid.

that Michel Foucault describes in the conclusion to *Madness and Civilization*, a force that must be cathected. '*There is no madness except as the final instant of the work of art – the work endlessly drives madness to its limits; where there is a work of art, there is no madness; and yet madness is contemporary with the work of art, since it inaugurates the time of its truth*'.<sup>184</sup> The work of art plays out psychic violence in language rather than in reality. Kelly Oliver writes of this cathection: '*...poetic murders are better than real murders*'.<sup>185</sup> The defence of Céline is that he writes hatred rather than enacts it.

But was it this flirtation with psychosis that prompted Céline's identification with fascism? Does Céline compensate for the effects of this writing into the night by affiliating himself with a mass movement? Does he regain a sense of identity through his anti-Semitism and his politics? Is the poetic murder instead of the real murder (as Oliver suggests) or, instead, a step in the direction of the real murder? The murder of the Jews takes place within words. These words, however, are disrupted. The message of hate finds that the medium resists it. Sartre felt that style was not something the politically committed writer should foreground; it should rather '*pass unnoticed*'.<sup>186</sup> The aesthetic qualities of a text are perceived by him as of secondary importance. For Kristeva, however, style is a key component in the production of change. Through his style Céline does battle with the symbolic function. He does not collaborate with the symbolic like a bondsman bending to the will of his master, rather he resists it. He breaks free from it, opening up the possibility of reappropriating it.<sup>187</sup> The calling into question of language in its symbolic aspect '*represents a microrevolution*' and '*is something that affects the social fabric and can potentially challenge the entire social framework*'.<sup>188</sup> Style, which is on the side of the aesthetic, likes to follow its own path. It is individual and therefore anti-totalitarian. Writing in style provides evidence of an author who chooses a path for language to follow rather than following the path of language. This author is unconventional. The author who has a distinct style (that is to say any style at all, unless an absence of style becomes stylish) creates himself in language. He *is* his style. A stylish

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<sup>183</sup> Henric & Kristeva, 'On Céline: Music and the "Blunder",' in *Interviews*, p.231.

<sup>184</sup> Michel Foucault, *Madness and Civilization*, Trans. Richard Howard, (London: Routledge, 2001), p.274.

<sup>185</sup> Oliver, *Reading Kristeva*, p.102.

<sup>186</sup> Sartre, *What is Literature?*, p.15.

<sup>187</sup> Henric & Kristeva, 'On Céline: Music and the "Blunder",' in *Interviews*, p.230.

<sup>188</sup> Julia Kristeva & Vassiliki Kolocotroni, 'Avant-Garde Practice,' in *Interviews*, p.215.



author is *involved* with language. Céline has style and through it he deprives the symbolic of its privileged status but he fails to carry out its reappropriation. His writings exist in a semiotic limbo. The cost of partially undoing the symbolic without renewing its authority was an identity crisis that required the author to identify with extreme politics. He lost himself.

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It is within Céline's style – a style best registered through reading his work aloud, although the internal voice of the mind lends sufficient support – that the way language resists the oppressive politics it is sometimes burdened with becomes evident. The use of ellipsis dots are one of Céline's most famous stylistic traits. But what are these three dots...bridges between groups of words...points of suspension...puncture holes in the prose...? All...and none...of the before. Are these holes...? If they are, then where are the holes? Are the holes the black spots upon the page...the dots? Are they in the spaces...between the dots? Are they in the caesuras...the pauses they institute in the speaking or reading of a passage...the interruption in the arc of the eye as it travels right across the writing? Are these...the holes? The holes which were present in *Journey to the End of the Night*...but not so much as to be especially noticeable...the holes that end a number of lines in *L'Église*...the holes...that are increasingly...in evidence...in *Death on Credit*...and omnipresent in *Rigodon*.<sup>189</sup> What do these holes do? If indeed they are holes. If they are dots they are marks, a kind of presence. The hole is an absence. Or a word - 'hole' - hiding an absence, hiding emptiness. Gilles Deleuze reads the three dots in Céline's novel *Guignol's Band* as working alongside exclamatory sentences to '*do away with all syntax in favor of a pure dance of words*'.<sup>190</sup> This seems, at least partially, to accord Kristeva's understanding of the ellipses, she suggests that in pure literary style '*all that remains is the tune, without notes...Not even the worship of Death...The three dots...Less than nothing, or more...Something else...The consuming of Everything, of Nothing, through style...The greatest homage to the Word that was not made flesh in*

<sup>189</sup> Louis-Ferdinand Céline, *Rigodon*, (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1969).

<sup>190</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Essays Critical and Clinical*, Trans. Daniel W. Smith & Michael A. Greco, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), p.112.

*order to hoist itself up into Man with a capital letter but to join, body and language being mingled, those intermediate states, those non-states, neither subject nor object, where you is alone, singular, untouchable, unsociable, discredited, at the end of a night that is as particular as it is incommensurable*'.<sup>191</sup> Both Deleuze and Kristeva find a rhythm in Céline's prose, a dance or music. The three dots constitute an asemantic element in the texts.<sup>192</sup> They carry the reader out of the comforting contours of meaning - the symbolic - and into the throb of the semiotic.

To read into this throbbing prose is to place oneself at risk. We usually search for meaning; we do not seek out its dissolution. This is perhaps why some readers are unwilling to join in the dance, why some readers never want to step beyond the content of the writing. Céline's pamphlets, and to a lesser extent his novels, are shaped by his politics. His style, however, does not run to form but away from it. In Céline's writing there flows through meaning *'the nonsemanticized instinctual drive that precedes and exceeds meaning'*.<sup>193</sup> The exclamation marks and the three dots point to *'this surge of instinctual drive: a panting, a breathlessness, an acceleration of verbal utterance, concerned not so much with finally reaching a global summing up of the world's meaning, as, to the contrary, with revealing, within the interstices of predication, the rhythm of a drive that remains forever unsatisfied – in the vacancy of judging consciousness and sign – because it could not find an other (an addressee) so as to find meaning in this exchange'*.<sup>194</sup> Céline's writing attempts to liberate what foment beneath the symbolic structure – to free up the semiotic – and thus to discharge it. His writing explodes in response to the pressure of a semiotic excess, a non-sense that needs an outlet. Kristeva writes of the pamphlets that they demonstrate how *'it is not enough to allow what is repressed by the symbolic structure to emerge in a "musicated" language to avoid its traps'*.<sup>195</sup> The extreme politics provide a *sense* of identity in a time of crisis. The politics counter-balanced the descent into non-sense, the falling into formlessness of

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<sup>191</sup> Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, p.135.

<sup>192</sup> In a section about ellipsis dots, Giorgio Agamben discusses the asyntactical and asemantic element present in punctuation. See Agamben, 'Absolute Immanence,' in *Potentialities: Collected Essays in Philosophy*, Trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), p.223.

<sup>193</sup> Julia Kristeva, 'From One Identity to Another,' in *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*, Trans. Thomas Gora, Alice Jardine & Leon S. Roudiez, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1982), p.142.

<sup>194</sup> Ibid.



the writings. The writing is, however, in part, beyond the politics it ostensibly espouses. The political is a shaping of the social. The music in Céline's prose is anti-social and unshaped; it is underneath, outside and beyond politics. It is a noise where no slogans can be heard, a non-space apart from all parties.

This noise – this interference – which Céline feeds into the symbolic is the cause of a loathing which power can tap into. As Jacqueline Rose explains: '*Céline's writing is a symptom. It reveals horror as a matter of power – the power of fascination when we are confronted with the traces of our own psychic violence, the horror when that same violence calls on social institutions for legitimation, and receives it*'.<sup>196</sup> His writing allows the reader access to the horror out of which we become whilst also revealing the dangers we confront when that same horror (which forever haunts us as subjects) can find no release. The horror within ourselves then becomes projected onto another. In Céline this other is multiple, but in the pamphlets it is primarily embodied in the figure of the Jew. The pamphlets demonstrate how drive force can be voided through language but also point towards the potential for a violent projection of these impulses onto others if they are not expelled.

### Céline Out of Context

The holes in Céline...seem to slow writing...to slow reading...to break it up...to make movement difficult...to bring it to our attention...that fact that we move through writing... This writing within the pamphlets...is about movement...mass movements...totalitarianism. A movement which relies upon motion...'*the only thing that counts in a movement is precisely that it keeps itself in constant movement*'.<sup>197</sup> In the same motion...with the same hand...that Céline uses to lend support to totalitarianism...with which he produces the political content of his writings...he writes against it. The potentially subversive nature of Céline's style was obviously recognized in wartime Germany where the stylistic innovations of *Bagatelles pour un massacre* were

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<sup>195</sup> Ibid. p.145.

<sup>196</sup> Jacqueline Rose, 'Julia Kristeva – Take Two,' in *Ethics, Politics, and Difference in Julia Kristeva's Writing*, Ed. Kelly Oliver, (London: Routledge, 1993), p.51.

<sup>197</sup> Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, p.260.

removed in translation.<sup>198</sup> Arendt recognized the totalitarian movement's dislike of artistic innovation, this because total domination does not permit '*free initiative in any field of life,*' and does not allow '*for any activity that is not entirely predictable*'.<sup>199</sup> Céline may have produced writings whose content lent support to totalitarian objectives but how much influence his work actually contributed to those objectives is open to question. As Arendt indicates of those from the elite '*who at one time or another have let themselves be seduced by totalitarian movements, and who sometimes, because of their intellectual abilities, are even accused of having inspired totalitarianism, it must be stated that what these desperate men of the twentieth century did or did not do had no influence on totalitarianism whatsoever*'.<sup>200</sup> The pamphlets did not inspire the politics. The politics distrusted the pamphlets. But whilst the occupiers and many of those with fascist sympathies disowned the pamphlets this should not detract from the fact that they were read. Céline is not excused simply because he was not fully accepted by those in authority. His writings had effects. The language of Céline gains its driving force from a feeling of loneliness. The absence of an other (of which the absence of the mother provides the model) against which to identify causes a self-fragility. Céline's language is complicit with his politics, carrying as it does an other who is everywhere – the all encompassing hate-figure of the Jew<sup>201</sup> – to a wider audience.

This 'carrying to a wider audience' as a sign of guilt, as a part of evidence for the case of the prosecution against Céline, could also be extended to an accusation against all those who engage with Céline's pamphlets in whatever capacity. They are all carriers of his ideas even when they condemn them. *Je m'accuse*. Julia Kristeva therefore should also be on trial here. Kelly Oliver, whilst troubled by Kristeva's use of Céline, is willing

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<sup>198</sup> 'The German version deleted Céline's punctuation, neologisms, crude language, and any passages that criticized Aryan decadence (except where applicable solely to France), the Nazi conception of war, and, of course, Hitler'. See Spear, 'Virility and the Jewish "Invasion" in the Pamphlets,' in *Céline and the Politics of Difference*, p.230 (n 6).

<sup>199</sup> Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, p.339.

<sup>200</sup> Arendt goes on to state that in earlier manifestations of the mass movement such men did help its doctrines to be taken seriously. Ibid.

<sup>201</sup> What Céline means by the term Jew is complicated. The figure of the Jew becomes almost all encompassing within the pamphlets. Africans, aristocrats, freemasons, Soviets and surrealists are each *enjuivés* or 'jewified' at some point. It is this quality which has rendered these texts by Céline impervious to a 'thematic political analysis'. Alice Yaeger Kaplan, *Reproductions of Banality: Fascism, Literature, and French Intellectual Life*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), p.108.



to give the thinker the benefit of the doubt.<sup>202</sup> This benevolence is not universally shared. For example, Jennifer Stone writes in her essay 'The Horrors of Power: A Critique of Kristeva,' that Kristeva '*has no political or ideological bearings when faced with Céline's cadaver*' and accuses her of having a '*hypnotic and nauseating fascination with fascism*'.<sup>203</sup> Stone abjects *Powers of Horror*, she is inclined to vomit at the writer's perceived attraction to fascism. She reads with her stomach. This reaction is of note because Kristeva describes abjection – which is characterized by a feeling of disgust – as possessing a moral aspect during the first chapter of *Powers of Horror*. Stone's sentiment might be understood as a manifestation of what could be called a 'visceral ethics'. In her book *Reproductions of Banality* Alice Yaeger Kaplan also expresses disquiet with Kristeva's '*rescue of Céline*'.<sup>204</sup> The '*aesthetic links in "Powers of Horror" are specifically to prehistorical, authorless forms of language production*' which means that the '*historical context drops out of the picture*'.<sup>205</sup> This presents severe problems for any effort to understand of the nature of Céline's fascism. For Kaplan, Kristeva's approach is an ahistorical one which reduces fascism to the status of an aberration which can be readily dissociated from an aesthetically radical modernist agenda.<sup>206</sup> Kaplan wants an approach that places Céline's writings in their historical context, and pays closer attention to how the pamphlets were received and read in France when they were published. She points out that the fascist appreciation of Céline's texts extended beyond their subject-matter to the syntax itself and quotes from a review of *Bagatelles pour un massacre* written by the journalist Lucien Rebatet in 1938, in which he describes how he and his newspaper colleagues at *Je Suis Partout* performed collective readings of parts of the pamphlet. Rebatet writes: '*let us read Céline in chorus...I want to make you hear...this*

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<sup>202</sup> Oliver, *Reading Kristeva*, p.102.

<sup>203</sup> Jennifer Stone, 'The Horrors of Power: A Critique of Kristeva,' in *The Politics of Theory*, Eds. Francis Barker, Peter Hulme, Margaret Iversen & Diane Loxley, (Cochester: University of Essex, 1983), p.47.

<sup>204</sup> Kaplan, *Reproductions of Banality*, p.108.

<sup>205</sup> Ibid. p.109.

<sup>206</sup> Stone shares Kaplan's concern with the lack of attention Kristeva pays to the historical circumstances within which the pamphlets were produced. '*Céline's political pamphlets, when read in a 1980s context, may seem to be divorced from the social conditions which led to their emergence and which made their racist programme possible. But if one considers the historical place of production of these anti-semitic writings, one cannot miss the signs to the factories of genocide*' Stone, 'Horrors of Power,' p.46. Kristeva would understand both fascism and modernist literature to be symptoms of the identity crisis precipitated by our era having put '*rationality into question*' Henric & Kristeva, 'On Céline, in *Interviews*, p.230. The pamphlets are indubitably of their time.

*joyous and formidable voice*'.<sup>207</sup> In 1938 *Bagatelles pour un massacre* existed not just as printed pages, but as a shared experience, and the sound of the prose was celebrated as much as the content. Kristeva fails to adduce the importance of Céline's personal politics, nor does she pay sufficient attention to the way in which his work was received.

Stone is critical of Kristeva for engaging with a contagious text, for catching Céline's right wing politics.<sup>208</sup> Kaplan, on the other hand, is troubled by her failure to engage with the politics of Céline and his contemporaries. Kaplan and Stone raise important questions about the relationship that exists between the writer and the written, the writer and the reader, and the reader and the written. For Stone, Céline is the source of a disease (fascist politics) for which his pamphlets are the means of transmission, retaining the potential to infect their readers. Kaplan however does not suggest that Kristeva has become contaminated by the politics of the pamphlets but rather that her way of reading them is irresponsible precisely because she avoids engaging with those politics. For Stone, Céline and Destouches seem to be one and the same whereas Kaplan opens up the possibility that, whilst Destouches is tied to a historical moment, Céline is not. Céline can be read out of context. Kaplan sees this reading out of context as highly problematic although not without value.

## Meaning and Morality

Any consideration of the politics of texts like Céline's pamphlets would seem to need to be grounded upon the responsibility for meaning. We measure the content of any text against the ethical template we have inherited, and then judge it as either good or bad. We form an opinion of the text based upon what it means to us, but where does that meaning originate? Does meaning come from the writer, the written or the reader? Or does it emerge somewhere in-between?<sup>209</sup> Both Kaplan and Stone emphasize the

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<sup>207</sup> Kaplan, *Reproductions of Banality*, p.126.

<sup>208</sup> Stone is not alone in her belief in textual contamination. The ability of certain writings to pollute their readers is given credence by some Romany, for example. Writing can literally be abject. This is briefly considered in Calum Carmichael's essay 'Gypsy Law and Jewish Law,' in *Gypsy Law: Romani Legal Traditions and Culture*, Ed. Walter O. Weyrauch, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), p.125.

<sup>209</sup> This is what a reader like Hans-Georg Gadamer would suggest. Linda Martín Alcoff explains how, for Gadamer, '*understanding occurs at a point of interaction between text and reader, and not at the point of*



importance of an attention to historical context in any reading of the pamphlets. This does seem to suggest that meaning is contingent; in any given text it is not something that is inherent and unchanging. Meaning shifts with the moment. A context is, of course, not itself inherent and unchanging, and indeed it may even be argued that it too is authored.<sup>210</sup> This would seem to privilege the reader as the locus of meaning. The reader decides the context within which the text should be read. The reader decides how the text will mean. This way of understanding texts calls for a contextual ethics. The context Kristeva produces for her reading is not sufficiently historical for Kaplan and Stone, hence it is an unethical one. Stone however does seem to hold out the possibility that the text contains something of the politics that produced it, that its politics transcend the historical moment within which it was produced. Its history is a part of it, not apart from it. Kristeva is seduced by the content of Céline's writings; for Stone she does not produce that content. Stone does not countenance the possibility that the pamphlets written in the name of Céline might not be fascist. This is either because Céline, as a fascist writing at a time when fascism was in the ascendancy, has permanently infected the words he used with his own political ideas, or because the words in the pamphlets have a particular and perpetual politics of their own. The author and his time either have some authority, or language is itself authoritative. The latter understanding would, for Foucault, be an example of the reintroduction of an author-function by a sleight of reading, in which '*the empirical characteristics of the author*' are transposed into the text in the form of '*a transcendental anonymity*'.<sup>211</sup> The words possess a unique hidden meaning if only you work hard enough to tease it out.

Céline did not seem to believe in his own authority over what he wrote, professing fears about his inability to control the text he 'authored'. In *Bagatelles pour un massacre* he writes of his fear that his work will be plagiarized:

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*the text itself*. Alcott, *Real Knowing: New Versions of Coherence Theory*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996), p.29.

<sup>210</sup> I will return to the question of context in my final chapter.

<sup>211</sup> Michel Foucault, 'What is an Author?,' Trans. Josué V. Harari, in Michel Foucault, *Aesthetics: The Essential Works 2*, Ed. James Faubion, (London: Allen Lane, 1998), p.208.

*Si mon petit ou gros navet contient quelque authentique substance, émotive, lyrique, il sera par eux promptement décortiqué, dégluti...Les Juifs sont plutôt mal doués pour les arts, biologiquement, du fond même de leur nature.*<sup>212</sup>

Céline is afraid that the body of his text will be skinned, that what he writes will be taken from him and incorporated into the work of others. He is frightened that the 'Jews' will steal from his own work to make up for their own lack of originality. As with so often in the pamphlets; Céline is projecting aspects of his own behaviour onto others. Kaplan has revealed that *Bagatelles pour un massacre* is 'but a hastily compiled collection of references that lend the text an erudite veneer that is pure simulacrum'.<sup>213</sup> The author has liberally stripped from the work of others to furnish his own text. His pamphlet is 'a tissue of quotations drawn from innumerable centres of culture'<sup>214</sup> but with a marked emphasis on weaving the material written by Céline's anti-Semitic literary precursors into the end product. His pamphlet is not his own. If the politics of the pamphlets exist in the words on the page then this politics precedes Céline. The writer is indeed only imitating 'a gesture that is always anterior, never original'.<sup>215</sup> This kind of understanding of writing seems to invite an abnegation of responsibility on the part of the author: I write what is always already written, therefore I never really write. Writing is unoriginal, the writer acts as conduit not creator. Céline is afraid that his work might be appropriated by other just as he has misappropriated other people's writings. He does not explicitly express the concern that his work will cease to mean in the same way if it is 'resited' by someone else somewhere else, but I think we can entertain the possibility that this is what is troubling him. I will return to this anxiety around appropriation later. Kaplan also suggests that the style of the pamphlets is in fact integral to their ideology. It is the rhythm of the prose as much as its purport that gives the pamphlets their politics. Style is political, and the style of these pamphlets is one that is allied to fascism. She does not read the style as working to undermine the meaning.

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<sup>212</sup> 'If my pulp fiction has any originality to it, sentimentally or stylistically, it will swiftly be stripped and swallowed by them...The Jews are really no good at the arts, it's biological, and goes to the heart of their character'. Céline, *Bagatelles pour un massacre*, p.69.

<sup>213</sup> Kaplan, 'Sources and Quotations,' p.37.

<sup>214</sup> Roland Barthes, 'The Death of the Author,' in Roland Barthes, *Image, Music, Text*, Trans. Stephen Heath, (London: Fontana, 1977), p.146.

<sup>215</sup> Ibid.



## A Putrid Poetics

If we accept that the style as well as the subject-matter of the pamphlets is morally reprehensible, then does this mean that what we might call Céline's 'putrid poetics' should be placed into permanent quarantine? Kaplan and Stone are critical of Kristeva because she is not condemnatory enough of the ideological content of the pamphlets. Is it therefore ethically sound to engage with a work like *Bagatelles pour un massacre* as long as the writer distances themselves from the politics of the work? Is commentary permissible if the requisite tone of disdain is maintained throughout, so long as it is made explicit that Céline's politics are objectionable? Would this kind of reading be an ethically acceptable one? Or would this kind of reading merely help to fortify the fascist politics it seeks to censure? The citing of passages from Céline's pamphlets within the context of a critical essay could be understood to provide a source of reinvigoration for those passages. The '*critic reanimates*'.<sup>216</sup> Céline is still worth writing about, even in a negative sense. The condemnatory essay is always, in some sense, complicit with that which it seeks to castigate. It must repeat the writing it wishes to hold to account. The denunciation outright of the content of the pamphlets also sentences hundreds of pages of words to a singular meaning. A simple proscription of the pamphlets as anti-Semitic and fascist serves to confirm them as such. The possibility that language might resist the politics it was intended to support is not entertained. Kaplan and Stone seek to preserve the pamphlets in their fascist context and thereby perpetuate that context. They do not consider the possibility that parts of the pamphlets could be made to mean differently if they were taken out of context.

In her book *Excitable Speech*, Judith Butler describes how the contexts of the speech act are '*never fully determined in advance*' and explains that there is always '*the possibility for the speech act to take on a non-ordinary meaning, to function in contexts where it has not belonged*'.<sup>217</sup> Through the process of 'reappropriation' (the putting into play of the speech act in more favourable contexts) a negative term can undergo an affirmative resignification. Butler illustrates this process through a discussion of the term

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<sup>216</sup> Sartre, *What is Literature?*, p.18.

<sup>217</sup> Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative*, (London: Routledge, 1997), p.161.

‘queer’ in the final chapter of her book *Bodies that Matter*.<sup>218</sup> Can what Butler writes about the performative be applied to *Bagatelles pour un masscare*? There is a big difference between a single term and several hundred pages of text. Céline himself however seemed troubled by the possibility of reappropriation. We might understand his reluctance to acknowledge his influences in *Bagatelles pour un masscare* – the silent citations throughout the pamphlet – as a manifestation of his desire to preserve the illusion of intention in his work. The hatred in the pamphlets which Kaplan and Stone accord such authority to, accumulates that ‘*force of authority through the repetition or citation of a prior, authoritative set of practices*’.<sup>219</sup> Hatred exists as quotation. The hatred in the pamphlets succeeds because it draws upon the accumulated force of its previous expressions. Kaplan and Stone do nothing to challenge this cumulative power by their attitude. Kristeva, in *Powers of Horror*, at least refuses to unquestioningly promulgate a politics of disapprobation through her desire to read the pamphlets outside of their usual context. She therefore instigates a rupture in the usually uninterrupted line of citational descent which lends Céline’s language its perceived power. Like speech acts, the written word is separated from its future effects by a gap. Kristeva works within this gap. She does not assume a position of sovereignty in relation to the pamphlets, the reader is not rendered master of meaning here. Kristeva exercises her agency within the constraints of a language which always already antecedes and constitutes her. Butler believes that agency begins where sovereignty wanes. ‘*The one who acts (who is not the same as the sovereign subject) acts precisely to the extent that he or she is constituted as an actor and, hence, operating within a linguistic field of enabling constraints from the outset*’.<sup>220</sup> The act of ‘reappropriation’ is not the birth of the sovereign reader. The reader who writes hate-speech out of context, who writes hatred in order to contest it, does not have ultimate control over the language they employ. This absence of control is part of the ‘*subversive promise*’ of agency.<sup>221</sup> It is our ethical responsibility to make good this promise. But there is the matter of the pamphlets themselves...

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<sup>218</sup> Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex”*, (London: Routledge, 1993), pp.223-242.

<sup>219</sup> Ibid. p.227.

<sup>220</sup> Butler, *Excitable Speech*, p.16.



## The matter of the pamphlets themselves

Céline prohibited the republication of the pamphlets and his descendants have continued this interdiction.<sup>222</sup> This voluntary suppression took place to prevent the pamphlets from continuing to cause harm after the war. *Bagatelles pour un massacre* sold well prior to this self-censorship, with Céline estimating that he earned 60,000 to 80,000 old francs in royalties from the pamphlet.<sup>223</sup> Despite the fact that by the end of the war 75,000 copies of the work had been sold in France alone<sup>224</sup>, it is now difficult to find and gain access to the work. This has helped to contribute to its mythic status.<sup>225</sup> The more these works are engaged with the less the legend of their evil brilliance can continue to gain currency. In this sense projects like those of Kaplan and Kristeva are both of value, in that they contribute to the ongoing operation of debunking the fictions that surround Céline's pamphlets. I would not however advocate a reprinting of the pamphlets were it to become permissible, nor do I find the quotation of parts of the works (in whatever context) entirely unproblematic.

Little attention in any of the writings about the pamphlets is given to the materiality of these texts, the matter of the words themselves and the surface upon which they are inscribed, the printed page. To read the original pamphlets is a very different experience from reading about them. The dialogue between the reader and a copy of *Bagatelles pour un Massacre* is one beyond words. The pamphlet exceeds the words that are a part of it. The words are bounded by margins, floating above and between the yellowing paper upon which they are printed. The yellow paper...yellow...a colour 'associated with degradation and discredit' and also the colour associated with ageing.<sup>226</sup> The pamphlets are growing old. The eyes that scan across the page see this discolouration, this sign of the paper in decline. The eyes see the broken corners of some pages. They register the insult of the white threads that bind the pages together, their unsettling appearance of newness. The fingers feel the textured and relatively thick paper.

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<sup>221</sup> Butler, *Bodies that Matter*, p.241.

<sup>222</sup> Philippe Alméras, *Je suis le bouc: Céline et l'antisémitisme*, (Paris: Éditions Denoël, 2000), pp.7-8.

<sup>223</sup> Alméras, 'Céline's Masquerade,' p.76.

<sup>224</sup> Hewitt, *Life of Céline*, p.171.

<sup>225</sup> Henri Godard, *Céline scandale*, (Paris: Gallimard, 1998), p.96.

<sup>226</sup> Steven Conner, *The Book of Skin*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004), p.164.

It is dry and fragile. There is a smell to reading that exists in excess of this feeling and seeing. There is the dry smell that bespeaks the maturity of the paper. At the moment, when Céline's prose is read in its original type-setting, the pamphlets exist as a state of decay. They are dying.

This experience of the pamphlets is lost when extracts from them are read in quotation. Citations from the pamphlets, in or out of what is perceived to be a suitable context, provide the prose with a renewal, a rejuvenation. This is where the limitations inherent in transposing Butler's ideas onto a text like *Bagatelles pour un Massacre* are revealed. To cut any of the text from its musty paper and to paste it into a publication in the present, is to smooth the wrinkles that bear testimony to its past. The print on this page, in its haecceity, in its here and nowness, obscures the original paper in its now and thenness. Butler is sensitive to this problem of reinvigoration. The one who recites hate-speech is responsible for the manner in which that repetition is carried out.<sup>227</sup> It would seem in this instance that the responsible act would be not to repeat Céline's prose. Outside the increasingly fragile pages of the pamphlets, the passages Céline composed or appropriated gain a new lease of life. It is true that they may be made to mean differently yet this attempt at reappropriation is also open to failure. The writer cannot control the response of the reader. The content of texts like those by Kaplan and Kristeva, which contain quotations from the pamphlets, may be deployed against the grain of the usage they were originally intended for (as a condemnation of fascism, or as an illustration of the psychic underpinnings of modern literature respectively) in the future. Any citations will always exceed the parameters set around their interpretation in the present.

The act of quotation, the work of repetition, always entails a loss, something is invariably left behind. This loss is what occasions the potential for resistance in repetition. The loss is necessary for there to be any hope of change. This privation at the heart of repetition should therefore usually be understood as a positive characteristic. In the case of the pamphlets however, perhaps the loss is greater than the gain. It is not only the age of the prose that becomes buried in the action of citation though. There are other forfeitures. The quotations from the pamphlets reproduced in books about Céline are likely to be unfaithful to the way the text they apparently simply reiterate actually

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<sup>227</sup> Butler, *Excitable Speech*, p.27.



appeared on the page. The technology of the printing press has advanced greatly since the Thirties and Forties. In 1938 the mediation of the printing process, the gap between the writer and the reproduction of his writing, created a significant possibility for errors to occur. Error is a form of resistance. The printing press is supposed to repeat the writers words over and over again but there is always the potential for this process of reproduction to go astray. It is this straying from the typescript which is lost when Céline is cited in the present. Like an old record, Céline is cleaned up in quotation. His hiss – the unsettling, extraneous noise – is removed. The context within which the pamphlets were written was never one in which intention would be fulfilled by the end product. The end product includes interference that disrupts intent.

In the copy of *Bagatelles pour un Massacre* which I read, the printed characters on the page were often imperfect.<sup>228</sup> The i would sometimes occur solely as a dot, or as a line without a dot. It was either a head without a body, or a body without a head. Other letters also appeared in varying degrees of degradation. This damage was caused either by the incomplete inking of the plates during the printing process, as seems most likely, or possibly by damage to the plates themselves. To give a sense of the scale of this partial printing, on page 326 (chosen at random) the letter i is damaged in the words ‘*tennis*,’ ‘*civilization*,’ ‘*parfait*,’ ‘*animale*,’ ‘*Juif*,’ and ‘*air*’. On page 332 the end of two lines of text is missing, I underscore the missing sections:

*Quel théâtre pour cyclopes? ...cent décors échelonnés, t\_\_\_\_\_*  
*plus grandioses...vers la mer...Mais il se glisse, piaule, piroue\_\_\_\_\_*<sup>229</sup>

*J'accuse*. The citing of *Bagatelles pour un Massacre* in the present purifies the pamphlet, excising these imperfections that are omnipresent in the original. To reproduce these incomplete passages as complete is to conceal what is a material manifestation of the gap that exists between intention and eventuality. There is an incomplete correspondence between what Céline wants to say and what is eventually said in *Bagatelles pour un Massacre*. This resistance at the level of the matter of writing itself,

<sup>228</sup> This particular copy is held in the Special Collections section of the Brotherton Library at the University of Leeds.

<sup>229</sup> ‘*A theatre fit for Hercules? ...a hundred stage-sets spread out, t\_\_\_\_\_ / more imposing...towards the sea...gliding, padding, piroue\_\_\_\_\_*’. Céline, *Bagatelles pour un massacre*, p.332.

the ink that refuses to collaborate with the author, is also lost when parts of the pamphlet are reprinted. An ethical reading of the work would be one which drew the readers attention to its physical condition (an elaboration of the contextual ethics mentioned earlier).<sup>230</sup> The pamphlets exist in the present but not as they did in the past. It is important to age them, to acknowledge the changed circumstances in which they are now read. It is also equally crucial to draw attention to the way the pamphlets undermine the message they are supposed to convey, but not at the level of style, rather through the very substance out of which they are made. The damaged i's draw attention to the absence of the I in the text, the lack of authority within the writing. The ink refuses to be limited by intention. This refusal – in the matter that is print – matters because it highlights the possibility of refusal in general. The pamphlets are anti-Semitic, fascist, misogynist, and racist, but never perfectly so. The inconsistencies in the ink act as an invitation to a further contesting of the content, a rewriting of hate against itself. '*Les jeux sont faits*'.<sup>231</sup>

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<sup>230</sup> I will return to the question of an ethics of reading grounded in materiality through my discussion of the paintings of Francis Bacon in the next chapter.

<sup>231</sup> Louis-Ferdinand Céline, *Les Beaux Draps*, (Paris: Nouvelles Éditions Françaises, 1941), p.60.



## Chapter Two

### Listen your way in with your Mouth

*If his is a message, it gets lost in the “background noise”: it is not a communication, it is not a language, or at most it is a dark and truncated language precisely like that of a person who is about to die and is alone, as we will all be at the point of death.<sup>1</sup>*

*Perennial suffering has as much right to expression as a tortured man has to scream ; hence it may have been wrong to say that after Auschwitz you can no longer write poems.<sup>2</sup>*

### Seen but not Heard

Painting is the silent art. What does paint sound like? Paint, feint, quaint, taint, saint...paint rhymes...paint has rhythm...paint the word, not paint the thing. Paint the thing is coated by the word, it is the thing that is at once painted by the word, and painted over by it, the thing that lies beneath the ground and pigment of language, the unprimed thing underneath. The unprimed thing appears silent, as silent as the dead. John Cage once said ‘*until I die there will be sounds*’.<sup>3</sup> If he had extended his thoughts to the visual, he might have added ‘until I die there will be images’. When Cage entered an anechoic chamber – a place designed to shut out sound – he could still hear his circulation and in his nervous system, he could still hear himself. In darkness he would still see entoptic lights or phosphenes. Darkness and silence are for the dead. This thing that is paint is part of the land of the living, it is not without sound. There is something to be heard. This something might be noise.

Can we catch this noise? Can we ever apprehend those vibrations inside the inner ear – the ripples within the cochlea, those waves constantly breaking against the stereocilla and then combing up the auditory nerve – those movements that signal noise in transit? The ear (the organ we usually associate with hearing) can be described in physiological terms, but do these terms describe a process of becoming audible or do they instead abbreviate a journey into silence? Is the mind at the end of the auditory nerve

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<sup>1</sup> Primo Levi, ‘On Obscure Writing,’ in Primo Levi, *Other People’s Trades*, Trans. Raymond Rosenthal, (London: Abacus, 1991), p.161.

<sup>2</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, Trans. E.B. Ashton, (London: Routledge, 1990), p.362.

<sup>3</sup> John Cage, *Silence*, (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1966), p.

actually the place where noise ends and sound begins? Do we only ever *hear* sounds, sounds being understood here as the shaping of noise into something other than itself...rumble, fart, burp, breath...a shaping of even these, our bodily functions, into something beyond and outside themselves, into sense. Can we hear the noise before the sound or are our ears always behind, always already too late?

All things become in time, in motion, only death – the stilled life – is unbecoming. Action sounds, inaction silences. The high-pitched whine of the flatline on the encephalograph\_\_\_\_\_that indicates cardiac arrest should therefore be thought of as somewhere between sound and silence. Sound travels...sound is on the road...the speaking-clock, the scrape of the pen writing, the rasp of the paintbrush applying the ground (the *practice* of painting is soniferous)...are sound journeys. This voyaging in and as sound...this commotion...is in time...or we hear time in it...‘*And at my back I always hear time’s wingéd chariot hurrying near*’.<sup>4</sup> Time (as a stream or cycle) makes itself heard. There is a sound to the times of our lives. The passage of time can be measured through the audible and the inaudible. At the sound of the first cuckoo we hear the end of winter. We know we grow old when sounds are only seen and felt, or listened to in the inner-ear of memory, when we can no longer hear. We also age culturally.<sup>5</sup> This kind of ageing becomes audible in the songs we listen to, if we prefer Dead or Alive’s *You spin me right round (like a record)* to Danii Minogue’s *Put the needle on it* then we are hearing our age.<sup>6</sup> Each generation has its tunes; yet these tunes travel through time and on the temporal turntable our 45’s spiral from a moment to a memory.<sup>7</sup> Sound is a record. Sound keeps time.

Here I want to attend to the relationship between sound and painting. Can we catch sound in painting? Can we perhaps apprehend noise in the paint? There are sounds

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<sup>4</sup> Andrew Marvell, ‘To his Coy Mistress,’ in Andrew Marvell, *The Complete Poems*, Ed. Elizabeth Story Donno, (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972), p.

<sup>5</sup> For a moving description of cultural ageing see the chapter ‘Not to Undertand the World Anymore’ in Jean Améry, *On Ageing*, Trans. John D. Barlow, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), pp.78-102.

<sup>6</sup> Dead Or Alive. Danii Minogue, *Neon Nights*

<sup>7</sup> Sylviane Agacinski conceives of time as an ‘*infinite spiraling curl*’ in her book *Time Passing*, Trans. Jody Gladding, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), p.112. Perhaps we should conceive of our death as similar to the stylus that becomes stuck whilst beneath the turntable continues its revolutions. The film *Sea of Love* - which revolves around old records and their perceived significance - contains a scene which explicitly links music and memory. Sound can be a mnemonic aid. We hear sounds and remember things.



which take place in the artist's studio that could be memorised, preserved, recorded. We could capture sounds of the squeezing of tubes, the mixing of colours, the brush at work across the canvas, dabbing, swishing, thumping. These are effects which could be digitally edited by the mixing-desk palette, drawn-out, elongated, stretched like the canvas itself, or instead, compressed, compacted and condensed. Sound is malleable, much like paint. The sound of the making of a painting is not, however, the same as the finished picture. A record that was pressed with a recording of the creation of the picture would not share the same grooves as the dried brush-strokes upon the finished canvas. If a microphone were trained upon a painter painting there would always be something which would continue to remain beyond the process of recording, the substance at the end of the sound.

Can this substance sound? Does a painting like Francis Bacon's *Study after Velázquez's Portrait of Pope Innocent X* (1953) make a sound? There is certainly a ubiquitous sound embodied in the materiality of things – the distension of the canvas which takes place because of a subtle change in temperature, perhaps even the fading of colours – which we might define as sound at the molecular level. This sound, however, currently exists as an unheard heard, as a speculative vibration against the tympanic membrane. It would require a currently impossible amplification to render it audible. The ear must await an as yet unperfected process of time-lapse recording to aid its hearing.<sup>8</sup> There are louder, more immediate possibilities though, acoustic interpretations of paint, of paintings. Bacons's *Study after Velázquez* is a painting which has inspired several composers, including Gerard Schurmann and Mark Anthony Turnage.<sup>9</sup> But have they really sampled the screaming Pope? Have they recorded and reused its sound, or have they bought their own sound to it? Do they play the painting? Certainly they have kept their distance; they have not touched the paint. It might be possible to persuade a very understanding curator at the Des Moines Art Center to allow you to record the sounds made by running your fingers across the painted unprimed canvas...across the smooth

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<sup>8</sup> The possibility of carrying out such a recording in reality draws ever closer. In recent medical research crystals have been used as microphones. They are designed to detect viruses as they break off from a crystal face whilst it is being electronically vibrated. Scientists at NASA have developed a device known as a 'nanomicrophone' made from carbon nanotubes which registers even the slightest changes in pressure and could potentially detect the sound of a single cell growing.





**Figure 1. Francis Bacon, *Study after Velazquez's Portrait of Pope Innocent X*, Oil on canvas, 1953. Des Moines Art Center, Coffin Fine Arts Trust Fund**



incorporate motion? Paintings are histories of gestures. They do not appear to be gestural in themselves. A painter could perhaps perfect a paint that never dries and apply it to a constantly vibrating canvas...but such a painting would only ever be becoming...it would never be painted. Gotthold Ephraim Lessing in his essay *Laocoon*, interpreted the moderation he perceived to exist in the artist's treatment of the expression of bodily pain in the famous sculpture as resulting from, amongst other things, the time constraints faced by the sculptor. He points out that whereas the poet does not have to '*concentrate his picture upon a single moment*,' the artist does.<sup>12</sup> It is hard to make a single block of sculpted marble stand for an entire poem, it is difficult to fold the whole of a moving story into a single moment from that story. A sound is also a period of duration and would require a similar condensation. A painting of a sound would need to be lasting but without length.

Salvador Dali painted perhaps the most well known attempt to depict time passing – to show the temporal motion – through the melting clocks in *The Persistence of Memory* (1931). In the *Study after Velázquez*, Bacon's timing of the image is of a different order. Movement is measured against the immobility of the Pope's gaping maw. This black mouth-hole functions to foreground the dissolution of the body around it, a body that is losing its outline, a body becoming uncertain. In this sense the mouth does act as a witness in the sense Gilles Deleuze understands it in *Francis Bacon: Logique de la Sensation*, it works as an '*élément-repère ou de constante par rapport à quoi s'estime une variation*'.<sup>13</sup> The mouth shows that the image is on the way. This is not an arrested outburst like the cry in Nicolas Poussin's *The Massacre of the Innocents* (1625) so admired by Bacon. In Bacon's painting, the motionless source of motion...the mouth...the hiatus...allows the rest of the pain to move, pushes the rest of the paint around. This is not the same technique as that employed by Edvard Munch in that well known cry, *The Scream*. In this crayon and tempera work from 1893, Munch tries to replicate sonorous vibrations through the use of concentric circles. Munch's picture is not uncertain enough, it is all sound and no fury. It is not a scream nor is it the representation of a scream. Just as, for different reasons, neither are those comic book depictions of

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<sup>12</sup> Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, *Laocoon*, Trans. Robert Philmore, (London: Macmillan, 1874), p.36.

<sup>13</sup> It works as a '*gauge or a certification against which change can be judged*'. Gilles Deleuze, *Francis Bacon: Logique de la Sensation*, (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2002), p.22.

screaming soldiers – the recourse to lettering, to a sub-Joycean attempt to write noise – the ‘Aaaaaaagh’ in a cartoonist’s speech-bubble. Both these examples are mere illustrations whereas I want to argue that Bacon’s painting actually is a noise, or at least attempts to be so.

Munch’s *The Scream* is actually a cry. The Norwegian title *Skrike* can in fact mean to shout, scream, or cry out. It is more ambiguous than the simple translation of ‘scream’ would suggest. A cry is thoughtful in a way that screaming is not, perhaps it could be said that a cry is thought out whereas a scream is outside thought. The cry is certainly reasoned. It is intentionally expressive.<sup>14</sup> Munch is afraid, he paints his fear, he cries out. Fear need not be rational, but it is always the giving of shape to an experience. Experience itself is a shape, an effect of shaping. Feeling is a giving of form to the world. It is a question of outline. Munch’s painting is bounded. The face of the homunculus – head shaped like a light-bulb – is an unbroken form, clearly distinct from the bridge and the water that form its backdrop. In contrast, Bacon’s style of painting is *malerisch*, loose brush-work, *laissez-faire* facture. It is a trying not to think in the way of the paint, to purify it, to shape it. The Pope’s outline is imperfect, punctured. The boundary between figure and ground is indistinct. The Pope is not so much misshapen as losing his shape. A scream is not a sound. It is not delineated. It is shapeless. It is close to the noise out of which outline is extricated.

Noise works against thinking. Arthur Schopenhauer complains in the section of *Parerga and Paralipomena* entitled ‘On Din and Noise,’ about ‘*the torture thinkers have to endure from noise*’.<sup>15</sup> He is particularly irritated by the noise of the cracking of whips which he writes of as:

*...this sudden sharp crack which paralyses the brain, tears and rends the thread of reflection and murders all thought, (which) must be painfully felt by anyone who carries anything in his head resembling an idea. All such cracks must, therefore, disturb hundreds in their mental activity, however humble its nature,*

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<sup>14</sup> Martin Heidegger suggests that a cry can be a call, can express a state of being such as distress. What differentiates the cry from the call is its transience, ‘*it can offer no lasting abode to either pain or joy*’. Heidegger, *What is called Thinking?*, Trans. J. Glenn Gray, (New York: Harper & Row, 1968), p.124.

<sup>15</sup> Arthur Schopenhauer, *Parerga and Paralipomena: Volume 2*, Trans. E.F.J. Payne, (Oxford: Clarendon University Press, 1974), p.642.



*but they shoot through a thinker's meditations as painfully and fatally as the executioner's axe cuts the head from the body.*<sup>16</sup>

Schopenhauer's own account provides a prime example of shaping, of the transformation of sound into sense, whip cracking as disturbance, distraction, diversion, interruption, whip-cracking named and described, thought about, thought through, made thought. In a similar way, although Bacon's painting may scream and aspire to be noisy art, my mobilisation of the painting to perform a narrative function, to narrate the absence of narration in the image, to storify it, is to sound its noise, to outline it and destroy it. My description demonstrates the violence of meaning making, the losses involved in any process of interpretation.

It is impossible to catch this noise in language or perhaps all too easy to do so, to imprison it, to put it behind these bars that are the letters and words, the crotchets and the quavers. There is a want within interpretation that could be understood as the ceaseless desire to form sound out of noise. Here this desire manifests itself in the effort to forge the scream out of the word or the concept, to frame it and intern it, to write it, to travesty it. Interpretation is however always incomplete, there is always a hole within it through which that which is under interpretation escapes, a 'something' which is always unaccounted for. Noise is the hole. Michel Serres writes in *Genesis* about the noise of the possible:

*The noise is the opening. The Ancients were right to say of chaos that it gaped. The multiple is open, from it is born nature, which is always aborning. We cannot predict what will be born from it. We cannot know what is in it, here or there.*<sup>17</sup>

Bacon did not even try to predict what would emerge from the opening. His practice was one which favoured the unpredictable, the chance elements and occurrences in the application of paint. A good example is provided by the 'whip of white paint' thrown onto the canvas at the last moment which appears on the shoulder of the figure vomiting into a basin in *Triptych May-June 1973*.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid. p.643.

<sup>17</sup> Michel Serres, *Genesis*, Trans. Geneviève James & James Nielson, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995), p.22.

<sup>18</sup> Sylvester, *Interviews with Francis Bacon*, p.94.





**Figure 2.** Francis Bacon, *Triptych May-June 1973*, Oil on canvas, 1973. Private Collection



Bacon's paintings are attempts to shake off meaning, to escape from shape. What Ernst van Alphen has described as the loss of self<sup>19</sup> that occurs to the spectator whilst looking at a painting by Francis Bacon might equally be understood as a loss of meaning or shape. The spectator momentarily encounters pre-meaning, encounters an experience prior to its shaping as such. The self is not lost in this moment, it is left behind. The self is the template that sounds the subject. Bacon's paintings explore the noise and pain before the self, beneath the self.<sup>20</sup> *Study after Velázquez* is a merging of experience, a coalescing of sensation, a whorl inward and backward.<sup>21</sup> It is painful to look at and painful to listen to. By pain here I mean the experience of losing shape – the experience of moving towards a non-experience – of blurring boundaries. Elaine Scarry describes intense pain as world destroying.<sup>22</sup> The world is full of sounds and shapes, which make it signify. Pain – like intense pleasure – causes the disintegration of signification. You cannot *know* when you are in pain because *you* as a way of being in the world is paused. Pain becomes you, *you* fade into the background and the background out of which you originally emerged becomes foreground. In his essay on torture this is what Jean Améry called 'self-negation' when the '*flesh becomes a total reality*'.<sup>23</sup> The person who is being tortured '*is only a body, and nothing else beside that*'.<sup>24</sup> They are perhaps not even a body as our bodies are *shaped* to be. It is the *nothing* beside, behind and before the body. Pain is the burring of mind and materiality, it causes thought, which so often thinks of itself as ethereal, to feel the weight of the matter. In Bacon's *Study after Velázquez* figuration (the shape giver) is in the process of giving way to flesh. The painting is not a depiction of flesh but a becoming flesh, the paint bleeds. This is what Michel Leiris means when he described the possibility for a spectator without preconceived ideas to

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<sup>19</sup> Ernst van Alphen, *Francis Bacon and the Loss of Self*, (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1993).

<sup>20</sup> Here I do not mean to suggest that Francis Bacon is trying to communicate his own pain through the paint. This noise beneath the subject is not of the subject. I do not think that paint can vehicle an artist's feelings, as the critic Clement Greenberg would seem to suggest in his essay 'Towards a Newer Laocoon' from 1940. See Clement Greenberg, *The Collected Essays and Criticism: Volume 1*, Ed. John O'Brian, (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1986), pp.23-37. For a good summation of the argument against such a notion see Fred Orton, *Figuring Jasper Johns*, (London: Reaktion, 1994), particularly pp.200-214., and Fred Orton, '(Painting) Out of Time,' in *parallax* 1:3 (September 1996), pp.99-112.

<sup>21</sup> This whorl is often figured in Bacon's paintings, in the form of smeared faces and smudged bodies.

<sup>22</sup> Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), p.29.

<sup>23</sup> Jean Améry, *At the Mind's Limits*, Trans. Sidney Rosenfeld, (London: Granta Books, 1999), p.33.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.



experience *'un ordre de réalité chair et sang qui n'est pas sans rapport avec ce qu'un acte paroxystique tel que l'amour physique fait toucher dans la vie ordinaire'*<sup>25</sup> when they look at one of Bacon's canvases. The spectator views Bacon's paintings viscerally. It is an unthinking seeing.

In her chapter on torture in *The Body in Pain*, Scarry reads the experience of pain as a movement towards an unwording. During a forced confession the tormented prisoner reaches *'aimlessly for the name of a person or place that has barely enough cohesion to hold its shape as a word and none to bond it to its wordly referent'*.<sup>26</sup> Sometimes pain attains such a level of intensity that words are emptied of their meaning, the prisoner then speaks in husks. The confession in these circumstances forms part of a process of disintegration of signification, it *'is a halfway point in the disintegration of language, an audible objectification of the proximity of silence – the torturer and the regime have doubled their voice since the prisoner is now speaking their words'*.<sup>27</sup> Bacon's art work is in this sense a confessional one. He is constantly trying to paint a series of signs that are not in his hand, trying to make paint speak in tongues other than his own. He likes chance to speak in his stead, and says *'if anything works for me, I feel it is nothing I have made myself, but something which chance has been able to give to me'*.<sup>28</sup> For Scarry it is only a particular kind of confession – the confession made under duress – which involves speaking as another. The prisoner who is tortured begins to speak for the regime rather than for her/himself because pain dissociates the prisoner's voice from their self. It is possible however to think of all confessions as produced under some form of compulsion. Faith and morality – when they are cited as the incitement for a confession – might be construed as the internalised mechanisms of a more subtle and insidious method of

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<sup>25</sup> The possibility for a spectator without preconceived ideas experience *'an order of flesh and blood reality similar to that which an ecstatic act like love-making touches in the everyday'*. Michel Leiris, *Francis Bacon ou la brutalité du fait*, (Paris: Éditions le Seuil, 1995), p.77.

<sup>26</sup> Scarry, *The Body in Pain*, p.35.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid. p.36. Scarry's notion of language here is one constituted by words. In my reading of Scarry I may appear to conflate signification with language. This is because it is my own belief that moments occur in torture where not just language but also consciousness disintegrates. Signification is the interpretation of experience, for example a paper-cut prompts a response – a signing - from the one cut. It is necessary to try and imagine a thousand paper-cuts experienced simultaneously. This would cause the obliteration of the One. Intense pain overwhelms the interpretive capacity. Language in the sense I am using it refers to any act of interpretation, any sense-making, any recognition of signification. When pain becomes all encompassing, becomes one, nothing is signified because signification requires a reader. The reader is consciousness as sign producer and dictionary of meanings.



torture. No confession is in our own voice, in the sense that all confessions are effects of a power that always originates elsewhere. This allows us to read Bacon's pursuit of chance – his conscious desire to paint by accident – as an attempt to break out of power. The only way for *you* to confess is to not speak as you. Confession must originate from outside shape, from beyond power. Power delimits the contours of the knowable. Bacon's paintings are an invitation into an outside of power.

Scarry separates the body and the self in her analysis of torture. She believes torture is an amplification of an always already innate division between the two. Torture makes emphatic '*the ever present but, except in the extremity of sickness and death, only latent distinction between a self and a body*'.<sup>29</sup> Speech and writing (which constitute language for Scarry) embody – or give shape to – the self, and allow it to break out of its corporeal confines.<sup>30</sup> If you destroy the voice or writing you absent the self, but by attacking the body you make it present whereas usually it passes unnoticed. In terms of our own bodies we are all ordinarily invisible men. The opposition between body and self is soundly delineated but artificial. Self and body are two shapes in the geometry that is signification, two shapes that produce and reinforce power. They are effects – contours with histories – and the division they have formed can be undone. Bacon's blurred and besmeared figures and faces form a bringing together of the self and the soma, the mind and the body.

Painting is sometimes read as a form of writing. In Scarry's terms, if it was such, it would therefore embody the self. *Study after Velàzquez* is painting as unwriting. In this sense it is reminiscent of the signature Guy Fawkes appended to his final confession, a chilling example of writing losing its shape...moving towards unreadability...towards the dubious freedom of illegibility. Fawkes's final signature (and there are several signed confessions so it is possible to track the deterioration in his writing) is writing within pain, writing wherein the boundaries between signs are collapsing. Pain disturbs contours. It is a violent making of, or taking to, noise. Jacques Attali writes that '*to make*

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<sup>28</sup> Sylvester, *Interviews with Francis Bacon*, p.52.

<sup>29</sup> Scarry, *The Body in Pain*, p.48.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid. p.49.

*noise is to interrupt a transmission, to disconnect, to kill*'.<sup>31</sup> Intense pain interrupts shape and disconnects signs by pushing them into each other. Signs need space. In great pain the world becomes too small to accommodate them. Agony is this pain. The agonized experiences a pain beyond pain, beyond language. The word 'pain' cannot register this feeling. It is unwordable. The word 'pain' is opaque; it obscures the event it designates. Words are above things, they are the destructive lacquer that is necessary to mean. Pain is the return of the underwork. It is sensation outside sense. Sense-making is the forging of an experience in something other than itself, in its interpretation. Pain cannot be interpreted, it *is*. The word fakes it.

Great pain cannot be communicated. As Jean Améry explained, '*If someone wanted to impart his physical pain, he would be forced to inflict it and thereby become a torturer himself*'.<sup>32</sup> The words would need to cut the reader to carry the pain. Even if the words are bypassed and the pain is physically induced this might not succeed, to impart is to make known, and great pain is not known, it is become. The one in pain – most intimate with pain – is known by pain, rather than knows pain. The tortured person – for whom the body has become all encompassing – has a body *without* signification. It is not a body as we understand our bodies. It is not a body the experience of which is mediated by discourse. It is not a body opposed to, and yet reliant upon, the self. It is a body outside.

The tortured body is not even a body forced to resist in the sense that Foucault conceives of resistance in the first volume of *The History of Sexuality*. It is here that Foucault writes the oft cited words, '*where there is power, there is resistance*,' and the less often sighted '*and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power*'.<sup>33</sup> For Foucault, power is always located in relations. In a Foucaultian sense then, in the context of torture, power does not reside in the person who tortures but in their relation to the person tortured. Power exists in connections, it is never isolated. It is also connected, it is coupled to resistance. The body in intense pain produces a situation in which there is no resistance. The body in agony is not relational.

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<sup>31</sup> Jacques Attali, *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*, Trans. Brian Massumi, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), p.26.

<sup>32</sup> Améry, *At the Mind's Limits*, p.33.

<sup>33</sup> Michel Foucault. *The History of Sexuality: Volume 1*, (London: Penguin, 1981), p.95.



William Haver has written that '*entirely other than a subject, flesh in the plenitude of the pain that supplants every possible ontology is utter singularity, nothing but its 'ownmost' non-relationality*'.<sup>34</sup> The flesh is flesh. The scream is scream. The body is all, hence it is nothing. The knowable is a realm of relations. It is a place of spaces...spaces open up the possibility of connections between things. We *know* through the *space* between knowing and not knowing. The non-relational is outside knowing and not-knowing. Interpretation also requires the relational. The one in intense pain transcends experience because experience is always already an interpretation. Intense pain surpasses the interpretative capacity. This folding inwards (the collapsing of any and all relations) that occurs in instances of extreme torture causes the one in pain to move outside power. Power requires space, in the absence of space there can be no power, there can be no master and bondsman.<sup>35</sup>

As Jacques Lacan has pointed out, pain has a complex character. It is '*an intermediary between afferent and efferent*'.<sup>36</sup> Pain moves between the inward and the outward. Scarry has written of Bacon's pictures of solitary figures that they are '*turned inside out, revealing the most inward and secret parts*'.<sup>37</sup> This is true not just of what is depicted but also of the spectator. The spectator sees with their stomach. Their stomach sees them. The paintings bring back the body. In *Study after Velázquez* the inside of the body is brought out by the scream. Georges Bataille once wrote of the overwhelmed individual who throws back their head, that they appear as if '*explosive impulses were (going) to spurt directly out of the body through the mouth, in the form of screams*'.<sup>38</sup> The scream disembodies. It throws the body outside its contours, makes the inside outside.<sup>39</sup> It

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<sup>34</sup> William Haver, 'Really Bad Infinities: Queer's Honour and the Pornographic Life,' in *parallax* 5:4 (October-December 1999), p.16.

<sup>35</sup> The fact that power requires the existence of relations and that extreme torture causes the cessation of the relational (hence removes the victim of torture from power) may explain the changing techniques employed in torture in many Western countries. The old-fashioned practices which destroyed the self have been abandoned. They have been replaced by methods designed to unsettle rather than undo the self. Physical pain is no longer an important component of torture. The aim in contemporary practices is to induce the one who is tortured into states of indeterminacy: Is it day or night? Am I here or there? Is this true or false?

<sup>36</sup> Jacques Lacan, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis 1959-1960*, Trans. Dennis Porter, (London: Routledge, 1999), p.59.

<sup>37</sup> Scarry, *The Body in Pain*, p.53.

<sup>38</sup> Georges Bataille, 'Mouth,' in *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings 1927-1939*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995), p.59.

<sup>39</sup> Deleuze wrote that '*tout le corps s'échappe par la bouche qui crie*'. 'All of the body escapes through the mouth that screams'. Deleuze, *Francis Bacon*, p.33.

is a voiding of space. The scream is pain. It is what Vološnov called the 'animal cry': *'The animal cry, the pure response to pain in the organism, is bereft of accent; it is a purely natural phenomenon. For such a cry, the social atmosphere is irrelevant, and therefore it does not contain even the germ of sign formation'*.<sup>40</sup> It is something exterior to ideology and outside the shape of the sign. It is the outing of the inner. An intermediary between the insides and the outside, it also exceeds intermediation. It is neither inside nor outside, nor is it both inside and outside, it is beyond inside and outside. It is the *'beyond-of-the-signified'*<sup>41</sup> out of which the signified became. Lacan calls it the Thing, *das Ding*. At times I will call it noise.

Lacan wrote that the Thing is inaccessible to us, that is has always been inaccessible.<sup>42</sup> There is no way to approach the Thing even though the Thing is everything everywhere, it must of necessity remain nothing and nowhere. The self acceded the Thing; abjected the Thing. This accession cannot be repeated without first having an abdication. The done has to be undone to be done again. We do not breathe in without breathing out. We do not sleep without waking. We do not forget without remembering. The self has no memory of the before self. The before is not within the self but around and beneath it. The before is the noise from which the self figures itself out. Attali understands noise to be a formless form of interruption that initiates change through its powers of censorship, through its capacity to annul the existing meanings of a given moment and open up a meaningless field out of which to create *'a new order on another level of organization'*.<sup>43</sup> In the beginning however noise interrupts nothing because it is not, it is the not out of which the self untangles and extricates itself as self, it is the meaninglessness that gives meaning its means, it is the shapeless needed to shape. It is that which is before we can say 'it' that enables us to say it. Noise lines the outline. It is the surround to shapes. It is the paper beneath the type.

Babies exist in and as noise before they are born, encompassed by and being the roar of bodily functions. This roar continues after birth. Didier Anzieu suggests that the alimentary and digestive activities *'turn the body into a resonant cavern whose noises are*

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<sup>40</sup> V.N. Vološnov, *Philosophy of Language*, Trans. Ladislav Matejka & I.R. Titunik. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1986), p.22.

<sup>41</sup> Lacan, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, p.54.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid. p.159.



*all the more disquieting for the baby since they cannot be localized*'.<sup>44</sup> Anzieu is correct to emphasise the non-localizability of this noise. Noise comes from everywhere and nowhere. It does not originate, it is the origin. It is an origin that is no origin, it founds origin. Origin arises from noise. Noise and sound as things, as differences; emerge from the no Thing that is noise. It is the Thing before the two. It is all and always. Here and there, not here or there, the thread of the reel that is noise is ever present. It must however silence itself for sound to become possible, for *fort* and *da* to be heard. Outside inside and outside, beyond closeness and distance, it is extimacy.<sup>45</sup> Noise is the intimate unknowable that gives me my edge and puts me on edge. The closest we come to noise is through the abject, that which '*lies there quite close*' but '*cannot be assimilated*'.<sup>46</sup> Julia Kristeva understands the abject to be that which we banish in order to be, that which, from its no-place of banishment beseeches '*a crying out*'.<sup>47</sup> She explains that in the writings of Louis-Ferdinand Céline the '*narrative yields to a "crying-out theme" that, when it tends to coincide with the incandescent states of boundary-subjectivity that I have called abjection, is the crying-out theme of suffering-horror*'.<sup>48</sup> The theme of suffering-horror is '*the ultimate evidence of (...) states of abjection within a narrative representation*'.<sup>49</sup> This crying-out theme of suffering-horror is the scream in *Study after Velázquez*. It is the pain of the desire to touch the untouchable. It is the knowledge of the impossibility of fulfilling this desire. It is the wanting.

Abjection, if not noise, is perhaps on the path back to noise...it is the experience of an unsound self...the experience of losing experience...of losing the shape that is an experience...of almost attaining the non-experience of unbecoming...it is a falling back to nothingness but a not quite getting there. The abject is not the *objet petit a*,<sup>50</sup> nor is it

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<sup>43</sup> Attali, *Noise*, p.33.

<sup>44</sup> Didier Anzieu, *The Skin Ego*, Trans. Chris Turner, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), p.163.

<sup>45</sup> It is an intimate exteriority. It is both inside and outside, hence neither inside nor outside. This does not make it an undecidable however, it is instead an underneath that is as close as it is far away. Lacan mentions 'extimacy' in *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, p.139.

<sup>46</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, Trans. Leon S. Roudiez, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), p.1.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid. p.2.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid. p.141.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Roudiez's excellent translation of *Powers of Horror* does fail to make the differentiation between the *objet petit a* and the abject as clear as is possible. Roudiez translates the key passage on p.1. of *Powers of Horror* concerning the distinction between the two as '*Nor is it (the abject) an ob-jest, an otherness*

an object, it is a border. It is the border between the I and its before, it is the brink of the I's history. The abject marks the moment when an I '*that is taking shape is constantly straying*'.<sup>51</sup> The abject is the hinge, it is the process of separation, it is not an after but a during. As mentioned briefly in the previous chapter, it is the requisite rejection for recognition to take place. Abjection is before the time of mirrors, acoustic, visual, or otherwise.<sup>52</sup> Abjection is the precondition for any identification with an other. It is a tenuous shaping that permits the self to take shape in an outside itself. It is a rejecting of noise, a seeking of sound. Mewling and puking in the mother's arms, the infant begins the journey towards an outside of this mother Thing. By screaming, the infant expels a part of itself from the confines of the maternal embrace. Screaming is a kind of shitting out (be that of fear, or of self). Mikhail Bakhtin writes that the gaping mouth is '*related to the lower stratum; it is the open gate leading downward into the bodily underworld*'.<sup>53</sup> The screaming mouth is a second anus.

Sigmund Freud believed that the scream was the source of conscious memory. The scream is the surface from which speech arises:

*In the first place, there are objects - perceptions – that make one scream, because they arouse pain; and it turns out as an immensely important fact that this association of sound (which arouses motor images of one's own as well) with a perceptual [image], which is composite apart from this, emphasizes the object as a hostile one and serves to direct attention to the perceptual [image]. When otherwise, owing to pain, one has received no good indication of the quality of the object, the information of one's own scream serves to characterize the object. Thus this association is a means of making memories that arouse unpleasure conscious and objects of attention: the first class of conscious memories has been created. Not much is now needed in order to invent speech.*<sup>54</sup>

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*ceaselessly fleeing in a systematic quest of desire*'. The original French text reads '*Il n'est pas...cet ob-jet petit <a> fuyant indéfiniment dans la quête systématique du désir*'. It might possibly be translated as 'It is not...this play-thing petit a ceaselessly fleeing in the unconditional quest of desire'. See Julia Kristeva, *Pouvoirs de l'horreur: Essai sur l'abjection*, (Paris: Éditions de Seuil, 1980), p.9.

<sup>51</sup> Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, p.11.

<sup>52</sup> For a description of the idea of the acoustic mirror see Kaja Silverman, *The Acoustic Mirror: The Female Voice in Psychoanalysis and Cinema*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), pp.80-81., and Anzieu, *The Skin Ego*, pp.168-171.

<sup>53</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his World*, Trans. Hélène Iswolsky, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), p.325.

<sup>54</sup> Sigmund Freud, 'Project for a Scientific Psychology,' in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Works of Freud: Volume 1 (1886-1899)*, (London: Hogarth Press, 1966), pp.366-367.



Here Freud is describing the infant's early proto-readings – on the path to interpretation – during which the sound of a scream (as shaped experience) is matched to a perceptual image. The scream acts to shape the object as unpleasure. Speech is not yet possible but there is a reading and writing in process, there is communication, there are signs. Noise is further back...

In the beginning there is the scream out which screams emerge, in the beginning there is the pain from which pains arise, in the beginning there is noise. Noise is the singularity that is outside the singular and the multiple. Perception and its objects issue from the noise, and in their issuance they drown out the noise. Noise is gradually abjected, rejected, silenced. In the beginning, we retch and wrench ourselves out of this noise. The nausea within noise...the gagging and vomiting...starts to pull us out of noise, or push noise out of us. Pulling and pushing...oppositions...separations...provisional at first but then fastening as experiences, becoming sounds. The screaming baby is carrying out an exhaustive disgorging of noise.<sup>55</sup> It is propelling noise outside the outside.

*Study after Velázquez* is an attempt to paint outside the outside. It is an attempt to paint back to the before of before and after, to paint the noise before noise and sound. The scream is the first and the final sound, a frontier of the self.<sup>56</sup> The screaming Pope tracks sound back to the edge of noise and then seeks to go further, from mis-shaping to unshaping. The whips of red paint, streaks which stand out against the white of the papal surplice, are interruptions in shape. These blood red spatters appear to have been thrown onto the canvas like the 'whip of white paint' in *Triptych – May-June 1973*. They seem to be after-thoughts, outside-thoughts, openings. These weals of paint flay the I. The '*real murderer of ideas is only the crack of a whip. It is meant to crush every good moment for meditation which anyone may at times have*'.<sup>57</sup> The sting of the lash breaks shape, ruptures reason. It opens the eye to the possibility of seeing something which cannot be seen, of hearing something which cannot be heard, of thinking something beyond

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<sup>55</sup> Within three weeks of a child's birth differentiation begins to occur in its screaming. See Anzieu, *The Skin Ego*, p.163.

<sup>56</sup> Reinaldo Arenas wrote '*I scream, therefore I exist*'. The scream is indeed intimately connected to being. The scream is the child's first oral assertion of its existence, and can sometimes be a man's last. Arenas, *Before Night Falls*, (London: Serpent's Tail, 2001), p.301.

<sup>57</sup> Schopenhauer, *Parerga and Paralipomena*, p.643.

thought, the possibility of an unthinking.<sup>58</sup> The painting shocks. It is traumatic, it wounds. Julia Kristeva asserts that Céline's effect is to call up within the reader, '*a nakedness, a forlornness, a sense of having had it, discomfort, a downfall, a wound*'.<sup>59</sup> Bacon might be said to call up a similar wound. *Study after Velàsquez* breaks the skin - the spectator's cutaneous contour – and opens inside to outside, opens an outside to inside and outside.

It is useful to return to Munch's *The Scream* here, Fredric Jameson reads the drawing as a demonstration of the limits of visual representation, a depiction of the impossibility of any artists efforts at self-expression. The inside can never become outside. For Munch the picture is the '*desperate communication and the outward dramatization of inward feeling*'.<sup>60</sup> He is seeking to substantiate feelings. Distemper and pastel become vehicles through which Munch seeks to exteriorise his inner-pain. This effort to carry distress from within to without is an unsuccessful one. The pastel is stubborn in its silence. These pigments placed and spaced across the board by Munch speak each to each to produce a figuration, but Munch cannot speak to me. Jameson believes that the failure of self-expression is underscored by the gestural content, '*since the realm of the sonorous, the cry, the raw vibrations of the human throat, are incompatible with its medium*'.<sup>61</sup> It is impossible to hear a picture. An artist should never mix the seen and the sounded. The gaze is deaf. Jameson reads Expressionism against Pop art. He believes that contemporary artists work in the realisation that the brush is not a bridge between artist and canvas, but rather a break. The artist is dead. This is not the place to engage with Jameson's cultural logic. I want to focus on his reading of Munch however.

I suggested earlier that *The Scream* is actually a cry. The picture is too considered to be a scream. Munch's picture does prefigure Bacon's *Study after Velàsquez* in one respect however. Hidden behind the twisted torso of the homunculus there is an

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<sup>58</sup> This 'possibility of seeing' is similar to the 'possibility of Saying' that Avital Ronell discusses in her essay 'Koan Practice or Taking Down the Test'. In the Zen practice of koan – the posing of a problem by a master for a pupil – the '*largely internal contest ... is intended to secure an experience of extreme dispossession*'. Thought is encouraged to out-think itself, to open to a thinking beyond thinking. This opening is often attained '*by the administration of a shock*'. '*The shock is crucial to the experience of the koan: it stages the opening of thought exceeding itself in the jolt*'. *parallax* 10:1, p.62.

<sup>59</sup> Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, p.134.

<sup>60</sup> Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, (London: Verso, 1991), p.12.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.* p.14.



impossible break in the railings of the bridge, a hidden fracture that unbalances the image. The lines of the rails on either side of the figure are not aligned; they are in this respect reminiscent of the impossible horizon in Leonardo da Vinci's *Mona Lisa*. These broken lines foretell a future rupture. *The Scream* seems flawless in its measured disturbance but the impossible join of the railings censures the representation's faith in itself. The noise is in this interruption behind the figure. The scream is behind the cry. The rails should form a coherent narrative – from foreground to background – for the reading I but there is a break instead. The gap in the railings introduces an incoherency into the image and what it relates.

Bacon chided narrative interpretations of his own work but they are inescapable. The narrative in *Study after Velàsquez* is interrupted however, making it similar to Munch's *The Scream*. This narrative is challenged, '*its linearity is shattered, it proceeds by flashes, enigmas, short cuts, incompleteness, tangles, and cuts*'.<sup>62</sup> The screaming Pope becomes incoherent because of the syntax, or lack of it, the disordered brush-strokes. This is an abject painting, one in which the '*limit between inside and outside*' has become uncertain.<sup>63</sup> The application of the paint is a violent one. The impasto white of the Papal robe and the thick brush-work of the yellow throne (perhaps it should be described as a box), manifest the effort expended in the production of the picture. The artist always used the rough side of the canvas, which makes the way he pulls broad strokes of paint across distance all the more impressive. The canvas must literally have been pummelled to apply the pigment in this way. It is not just the form the brush-strokes take though, but the sequencing of their application, which brings the abject to *be* in the portrait. A painting like de Kooning's *Woman and Bicycle* (1952-53) might be regarded as similar in the way that broad bands of paint are made to travel across a great expanse of canvas, but the American artist's technique is one that only depicts rather than enacts. De Kooning paints a figure already in fragments, an already made broken person. Bacon paints his Pope in such a way as to make and break him at the same time. It is this difference which prevents de Kooning's painting from ever aspiring to the poetic. Here poetry should be understood as narrative that is pulverised. It continues to carry its narrative origins as

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<sup>62</sup> Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, p.141.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

traces within it. De Kooning's woman is not broken, because she was always already broken. He painted her after the event of breaking. Bacon's *Study after Velàsquez* however is an event of breaking and this is what gives it a poetic quality.

Here poetry is a process of breaking apart narrative even if that breaking apart must of necessity create another narrative through its action. This second-order narrative born in its own death forever taunts poetry's claim to independence. Bacon seems to have painted a screaming pope and then to have begun to obliterate the image through the use of vertical black lines which cut through the existing figure. It is the creation and then destruction of a representation, narrative collapsed into poetry. This story of the creation of the painting is too simplistic. The effect of a curtain which ostensibly falls across and obscures the image is more complex. The curtain which appears to have been painted on top of the figure of the pope is in fact at times actually behind him. Some of the curtain appears to have been painted before the pope, and some after. Bacon scores his screaming pope with black brushstrokes in a process which should reintroduce a form of narrative. Any narrative is however made uncertain. The screaming pope is never able to become the coherent representation – the consistent narrative – that would constitute the mending of a poetic breaking. Those purportedly liberating, destructive downward sweeps of dark colour travel sometimes behind and sometimes across the figure of the pontiff and as much constitute as deny him. Poetry emerges in this uncertain process of description. The poetic is not superseded by narrative at this point. Bacon breaks up the operation of breaking up. The recognition of this deceptive technical practice is of course the introduction of a narrative once again, but Bacon has pushed story-telling back another level and may therefore lay claim to being one of the most poetic of painters. He has revolutionised the revolution that is poetry and that happens within poetry. This has important implications at the level of subjectivity.

The consistent inconsistency within the creation of the work unnerves the spectator and is one aspect among several in Bacon's practice designed to disturb the I. Within the space of Bacon's works - or in the space between Bacon's work and the eye – the spectator picks up the spoor of their own origin. The overwhelming sensation is one of abjection. It is a feeling of unease in the self which should be distinguished from van Alphen's belief that in this instant of looking I lose my self. The brutality of Bacon's



*Study after Velàzquez*, its horror, causes the spectator to feel repugnance. Deleuze detected a hysterical presence in the artists works and read painting in general as having a special relationship with hysteria. For him the hysteric is characterised as someone '*pour qui les choses et les êtres sont présents, trop présents, et qui donne à toute chose et communique à tout être cet excès de présence*'.<sup>64</sup> Deleuze believes that there is a special relationship between hysteria and painting, '*avec la peinture, l'hystérie devient art*'.<sup>65</sup> Colour and line exist as presence, they are not present to represent something but are in themselves. They are not in relation to anything. They are unshaped.

In psychoanalysis hysteria is usually defined as a particular response to a traumatic experience which is primarily somatic but can also manifest itself in and through phobia. In their essay 'On the Psychological Mechanism of Hysterical Phenomena: Preliminary Communication,' Breuer and Freud perceive the memory of a traumatic experience to behave like an alien within the organism. It is abreacted once a patient '*had put the affect into words*'.<sup>66</sup> This catharsis occurs not through a simple retelling of the experience but through the use of a particular language, one invested with affect which we might thus call a language of sensation. It is here that Kristeva's conception of language as two interwoven registers – the semiotic and the symbolic – is so useful to any understanding of this process. Freud conceives of affect as something that must be attached to words whereas Kristeva knows that language has a pre-existing affective dimension, a drive-invested underside (affect represents the drives). It is not a question of binding instinctual energy to language but of turning language on its head. Bacon's paintings occasionally twist the symbolic so that the picture plane develops spaces of semiotic intensity, places where the fracture fractures and the semiotic bleeds through. It is a giving of the flesh back to language. The action of language is usually that of negation, a repression of this somatic underside. Bacon's paintings are hysterical in that they insist on the body in language. This body is not given to the viewer however, it must be travelled to. The semiotic is witnessed only after a journey back into the night out of which 'I' became. It is an instant of impossible witnessing. I see before I.

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<sup>64</sup> The hysteric is someone '*for whom all things and people are present, overly present, and who gives this excess of presence to all things and tells everyone about it*'. Deleuze, *Francis Bacon*, p.52.

<sup>65</sup> '*With painting, hysteria is made art*' Ibid. p.53.

The narrative that is the narration of narrative's end, the second-order narrative described earlier is also the recounting of a voyage beneath and behind the symbolic. The freeing from representation that Deleuze sees to be part of painting's hysteric quality constitutes a liberation of the semiotic potential in language. The semiotic is a form of noise. Deleuze's description of painting as hysteria is particularly interesting:

*Libérant les lignes et les couleurs de la représentation, elle libère en même temps l'oeil de son appartenence à l'organisme, elle le libère de son caractère d'organe fixe et qualifié : l'oeil deviant virtuellement l'organe indéterminé polyvalent, qui voit le corps sans organes, c'est-à-dire la Figure, comme pure présence. La peinture nous met des yeux partout : dans l'oreille, dans la ventre, dans les poumons (le tableau respire).<sup>67</sup>*

Painting separates seeing from the organ of sight, or the organ of sight is not contained by the eye. Deleuze is describing an abject art practice. We could read the organs of the body – as they are named and separated, shaped – to be on the side of the symbolic. This corporeal cartography is gifted to the self by the mother who shapes it. The body without organs is the body without borders. Bacon's paintings do not signify in the usual sense but *show* instead.<sup>68</sup> The 'gagging sensation' and 'spasms in the stomach' which Kristeva cites as forming part of the experience of abjection should be conceived of as a seeing with the stomach and the throat.<sup>69</sup> Before the eye, we see with our body.

In one of his poems Paul Celan invites the reader to '*hör dich ein mit dem Mund*'.<sup>70</sup> This mouth-ear which shapes speech and produces sound now also receives and interprets it. At this moment it is as if Celan is inviting the reader to taste or touch language. There seems to be an element of synaesthesia here. Synaesthesia in clinical terms is defined as occurring '*when stimulation of one sensory modality automatically*

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<sup>66</sup> Josef Breuer & Sigmund Freud, 'On the Psychical Mechanism of Hysterical Phenomena : Preliminary Communication,' in *Studies on Hysteria*, (London: Penguin, 1991), p.57.

<sup>67</sup> 'Freeing line and colour from representation, it also liberates the eye from its belonging to the body, it frees it from its quality of fixity and function.: the eye becomes, to all intents and purposes, an indeterminate and varied organ, which sees the body without organs, meaning the Figure, as pure presence. Painting gives us eyes everywhere: in the ear, in the stomach, in the lungs (the picture breathes)'. Deleuze, *Francis Bacon*, p.54.

<sup>68</sup> Kristeva differentiates showing and signifying in *Powers of Horror*. That which is shown is unmediated, it should therefore be understood as similar to the kind of pure presence Deleuze describes. See *Powers of Horror*, p.3.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid. pp.2-3.

<sup>70</sup> 'Listen your way in with your mouth' (Trans. Michael Hamburger). Paul Celan, 'Die Posaunenstelle,' in Paul Celan, *Selected Poems*, (London: Penguin, 1996), p.350.



*triggers a perception in a second modality, in the absence of any direct stimulation to this second modality*'.<sup>71</sup> Celan seems to suggest that the taste of the words in the mouth or the feel of their enunciation through the tongue and the teeth can stimulate the ear. What Celan has actually recognised however is that the separation of the senses is artificial. He may have been influenced by Heidegger here as he was certainly familiar with some of the philosopher's writings on Hölderlin.<sup>72</sup> Heidegger had said that '*only because the bodily organs, mouth and ear, differ in how they look, and are situated in different places of the body, do we separate saying and hearing into two separate faculties and thereby overlook the original unity of both, which nevertheless first of all sustains the very possibility of their interrelation*'.<sup>73</sup> The senses are shapes that arise out of sense. Synaesthesia is experienced by those who have only learnt to achieve a partial shaping of sensations. Sensation – before it is made sense of – is noise. Richard E. Cytowic has suggested that perception might be '*like sculpting from a block of marble, exposing the statue within it by removing extraneous bits*'.<sup>74</sup> The block of marble is noise. Michelangelo's *Slaves*, unfinished tomb figures, can thus be read as on the path to sound, as shapes in process.<sup>75</sup> Celan's late poems seek to fold the senses back into each other, to push the statue back into the marble, to forego figuration in favour of presence, the presence of noise.

### The Shades: Part One

I will return to Celan's poetry later but first I would like to consider another factor that contributes to the effect Bacon's paintings have on the viewers, his use of colour. Colour is, of course, first and foremost a word. Colour is a form of violence, in its (de)scription of a perception; it is the destruction of perception. The cruelty of scription

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<sup>71</sup> John E. Harrison & Simon Baron-Cohen, 'Synaesthesia: An Introduction,' in *Synaesthesia: Classic and Contemporary Readings*, Eds. Simon Baron-Cohen & John E. Harrison, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), p.3.

<sup>72</sup> John Felstiner, *Paul Celan: Poet, Survivor, Jew*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), p.86.

<sup>73</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Elucidations of Hölderlin's Poetry*, Trans. Keith Hoeller, (New York: Humanity Books, 2000), p.146.

<sup>74</sup> Richard E. Cytowic, 'Synaesthesia: phenomenology and neuropsychology,' in *Synaesthesia*, p.38.

<sup>75</sup> For a brief history of these sculptures see Anthony Hughes, *Michelangelo*, (London: Phaidon, 1997), pp.161-162.

will be discussed later. For now it is time to concentrate on that which I have named and maimed, colour. Colour is born in light:

*And God said, Let there be light,  
and there was light.  
And God saw the light, that 'it was'  
good : and God divided the light  
from the darkness.  
And God called the light Day,  
and the darkness he called Night.<sup>76</sup>*

The wavelengths of light that are emitted or reflected from an object produce those qualities we term colours. Colour is somewhere between material and light, the substantial and the evanescent. The wavelengths are made up of electromagnetic-radiation; colour is an energy passing between that which is looked at and the eye. A child is born without knowing colours but begins to recognise them as the eye develops and the retina evolves. It is not that we never truly know night but that we emerge from it and overlay it. Night is the white light at the moment of birth. Night is the noise. Night is what impacts against the optic nerve before the rods and cones of the retina, which would give it recognition, have come to be. The world of the new born is colourless. There is a behind to colour, a history in darkness. This is the veiled time before the beginning that is the subject. Colour itself is old. It exists prior to the mirror-phase and accompanies the process of abjection as the subject struggles to become. Abjection links colour to that colourless time in the earliest stages of life. To encounter the abject is to approach a before of colour, a darkness. This journey is one which can be achieved through the experience of colours. Of course, the painter has to foresee colour's death whilst he works. Colour dies as it dries, it loses its intensity. The painter is a prophet, always fore-painting dead-paint. He knows what colours will look like dead, before they live. The painter experiences his colours in advance of their application.

Kristeva's remarkable essay 'Giotto's Joy' explores the social historical and subjective dimensions of colour as they are demonstrated in Giotto's frescoes at Assisi and Padua. Kristeva draws parallels between Giotto's art practice and the role of carnival as it is conceived of by Bakhtin in the now famous *Rabelais and his World*. She reads

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<sup>76</sup> *Genesis* 1:3-5 (King James Version)



Giotto's use of colour as an expression of governed 'anarchy' or a parodic challenge to authority. This leads one to ask how and where does this governance manifest itself? What polices the frescoes and prevents their achieving an authentic revolutionary gesture? Their governance is in the geometry - the parliament of forms - and in the serial nature of the images, the narrative.<sup>77</sup> Giotto's colours form blocks - rectangles and other shapes - across and within the plaster. The shape controls the colour. In Bacon's art, geometry often acts in a similar way, although it can also serve as a foil against which to emphasise moments of breakdown in which shape disappears, in which contour gives way. His blocks of colour sometimes bear witness to a quantity of unblocked colour that appears elsewhere on the canvas.

Colour is invested with drive. It forms a condensation of the drives. As such, it carries a potential threat for the subject, troubling the self-certainty achieved at the mirror-phase and through the resolution of the Oedipal complex. Bacon's shapes of colour (squares, rectangles etc...) function in a similar way to the grids and rectangles that are also recurring motifs in his work. These motifs ostensibly help Bacon to situate his image, but they also act as metonymic markers for the mother's primary mapping of the child's body. It is the mother who brings blocks of intensity and borders to being for the child. *'That order, that glance, that voice, that gesture, which enact the law for my frightened body, constitute and bring about an effect and not yet a sign'*.<sup>78</sup> The child has not entered into active relationship with language but has an awareness of difference. This constant surveying of the body by the mother allows the child to gradually cut itself free from her, as if the child were a pattern in a magazine, that tore itself out of the page along the perforations provided for it, the perforations that give it a potential shape even as it is shapeless. The perforations may *trace* a shape but the shape does not emerge until a separation takes place. The explicit grids or implicit squares (such as doorframes and bedsteads) within Bacon's work supplement (and are supplemented by) the blocks of colour. Slabs of uniform colour such as those in *Triptych (May - June 1973)* act as yardsticks against which to measure the misshaping of colour. If we look at the triptych we can see this technique in action. The two white arrows in the left and right paintings

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<sup>77</sup> Julia Kristeva, 'Giotto's Joy,' in Julia Kristeva, *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*, Trans. Thomas Gora, Alice Jardine & Leon S. Roudiez, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1982), p.226.

<sup>78</sup> Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, p.10.

as well as the doorframe which unites all three canvasses stand in place of the grid as signifiers of maternal mapping. The figure in the right-hand picture is not painted in uniform flesh-tones but as a whorl of colours. The brush-work has smeared and smudged the pigments into a purl of hues, such as the curve of red which shades into maroon and pink and beyond...into shades that exceed the nuances permitted in words...shades that are distinct but indescribably so. In this head and torso colour has lost its shape and thus its containment. When it becomes formless, colour relates and reverberates at another level. The negation of geometry liberates its semiotic force. Kristeva has described any chromatic experience as acting as '*a menace to the self*' whilst also cradling '*the self's attempted reconstitution*'.<sup>79</sup> At times in Bacon's work, colour works to upset the Self. Misshapen colour operates as a force of memory that carries the subject backwards and inwards towards the hollow core, the nothingness within.

It can certainly be argued that Jackson Pollock had pioneered a method (if it can be called 'method' because it relies on method as anti-method, like Bacon's art it requires an astute use of chance) for tapping into the semiotic aspect of colour. His drip-paintings do liberate colour and give free-play to the drives, this is what causes them to resonate. The spectator sees a shimmer of line and colour. Line as colour, not line as delineation, line unlined. Pollock's paintings do not wrench the subject however. This is because they fail to include the actual action of this chromatic breaking-free. There is no internal witness in Pollock against which to measure what has happened. There is also not the blurring of colour that Bacon records in his brush-drunk faces, a blurring that provides the history of the liberation of the colours that constitute it. Along with de Kooning, Pollock shares the quality of being a painter of after-effects, albeit for different reasons. He lacks process. Bacon's colours draw attention to their presence through contrast, this is what allows us to call them misshapen, his are works in process. They are not endings but openings. There is shape and there is the losing of shape depicted upon the same picture-plane. His whirls of colour focus the attention and promote unease because of their lack of clarity, their chromatic excess.<sup>80</sup> The words for these colours do not capture

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<sup>79</sup> Kristeva, 'Giotto's Joy,' p.220.

<sup>80</sup> In an interview the composer Luciano Berio differentiates painting from music because even abstract painting is '*always linked to a concrete reality*,' whereas the sounds of musical instruments cannot be found '*in nature nor in everyday life*'. For him this is what makes music more difficult to talk about, with



the shades. His colours exceed our powers of description. The figure vomiting into the basin is neither red nor white nor brown nor grey yet all these and tints in-between. Our ability to describe colour becomes uncertain and this uncertainty causes what we might describe as a chromatic insult. This insult is caused by the excess of colour that exceeds the words with which we seek to shape it. Words are possession and destruction. Arendt wrote that *'the most radical and the only secure form of possession is destruction, for only what we have destroyed is safely and forever ours'*.<sup>81</sup> Language seeks to destroy what it describes in a radical (dis)possession. Narration – the speaking of things – is absorptive. The colour in Bacon's paintings will not be narrated, will not be destroyed.<sup>82</sup> It is colour that uncolours itself, colour before it becomes *'an idea, an image, (or) a representation'*.<sup>83</sup> It is noise waiting to be coloured in by these things. Colour in its immanence. Colour outside ideology. Karl Marx and Frederick Engels wrote that *'in all ideology men and their circumstances appear upside-down as in a camera obscura, this phenomenon (arising) just as much from their historical life-process as the inversion of objects on the retina does from their physical life-process'*.<sup>84</sup> In the everyday colour is seen through the prism of ideology and appears upside-down. Something that Frantz Fanon recognises all too well, hence the heartfelt plea for his *'brother, whether black or white, to tear off with all his strength the shameful livery put together by centuries of incomprehension'*.<sup>85</sup> It is only when colour exceeds its shape that it can be 'torn off,' that it can return to being the right way up, which is to say neither right way up nor upside-down.

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*'music always puts up a considerable resistance to being "translated" into words'*. Bacon's colours might be said to have a musical quality because they are also resistant to wording. Luciano Berio, *Two Interviews*, Trans. David Osmond-Smith, (New York: Marion Boyars, 1985), pp.32-33.

<sup>81</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, (San Diego: Harcourt, 1950), p.145.

<sup>82</sup> Kristeva suggests that colour is what first enabled Western painting to escape the constraints of narrative. See *'Giotto's Joy'*, p.221.

<sup>83</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, Trans. Alphonso Lingis, (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968), p.142. Merleau-Ponty describes this immanent colour as an anonymous visibility that undoes the distinction between self and other through the commonality of its experiencing. Two people see the *same*, they see as one. Luce Irigaray suggests that colour also efface the difference between subject and object, it is the *'ground of the visible where seeing and seen are not yet distinguished, where they reflect each other without any position having been established between them'*. Irigaray, *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, Trans. Carolyn Burke & Gillian C. Gill, (London: Athlone, 1993), p.156.

<sup>84</sup> Karl Marx & Frederick Engels, *The German Ideology*, (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1974), p.47.

<sup>85</sup> Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin White Masks*, Trans. Charles Lam Markmann, (New York: Grove Press, 1967), p.12.

This colour at the edge of ideology, of language, is abject colour. In *Triptych (May – June 1973)*, the depiction of the action of being sick reflects the nausea experienced by the spectator, an experience prompted in part by Bacon's use of colour. Deleuze reads the retching body as a body seeking to escape itself. '*Toute la série des spasmes chez Bacon est de ce type, amour, vomissement, excrément, toujours le corps qui tente de s'échapper par un de ses organes, pour rejoindre l'aplat, la structure matérielle*'.<sup>86</sup> In fact this is actually a body seeking to protect its integrity, to preserve itself by abjecting that which threatens it: the memory of an archaic unity which would cause its dissolution. The origin of the word colour is the Latin word *color* which is in turn derived from '*a Sanskrit word meaning the skin on the surface of the milk*'.<sup>87</sup> Kristeva describes '*when the eyes see or the lips touch that skin on the surface of milk*' as an experience liable to bring on food loathing, the most archaic form of abjection.<sup>88</sup> Abjection and colour are intimately linked.

When Deleuze identifies the shadow as another instance of a body escaping from itself, this is also a misunderstanding.<sup>89</sup> The shadow gives contour or shape to the subject, it is usually a form of reassurance. The shadow in the central painting of the triptych does not function in this way however. This shadow which is so dissimilar to the seated man is charting the effect of an abjection which remains unchecked. The abject must constantly be purged. This purgation is usually performed by and in the realm of the sacred. '*The function of (...) religious rituals is to ward off the subject's fear of his very own identity sinking irretrievably into the mother*'.<sup>90</sup> A confrontation with the abject – unmediated by the sacred - means psychosis or death for the subject. The shadow which spills out from the doorway in *Triptych May-June 1973* suggests a subject slipping towards psychosis – out of shape – a subject returning to the state of an *hommelette*. This is a subject in transition towards the non-identity and death of unmapped drives. The boundaries that contain that liquidity which characterises identity have been broken. The self is flowing back into the night of non-being. There is no arrow in this picture, nothing to keep shape.

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<sup>86</sup> '*The entire series of convulsions in Bacon are of this type, having sex, puking, shitting, always a body trying to escape itself through one of its organs, to get back to the flat, the material world*'. Deleuze, *Francis Bacon*, p.24.

<sup>87</sup> Steven Conner, *The Book of Skin*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004), p.151.

<sup>88</sup> Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, p.2.

<sup>89</sup> Deleuze, *Francis Bacon*, p.24.



The presence of the light-bulb which casts this disturbing shadow is of significance. It is not present in the other two paintings (although the left-hand canvas contains the light-switch), which are without shadow. This light-source in the central picture signifies the ‘*flash of lightning*’ which reveals a forgotten time, a time during which the clean was filthy, the pure impure.<sup>91</sup> A time before cleanliness and filth, before separation. It recalls the time that which is beyond recall. ‘*The time of abjection is double: a time of oblivion and thunder, a veiled infinity and the moment when revelation bursts forth*’.<sup>92</sup> We are at the extreme of insight, a death in life which portrays an unravelling but not unravelled subject. The central picture represents an impossible time, the moment before self which should never be known to self. Bacon has taken us backwards in the forward motion that is painting, brushstrokes pulling paint in one direction to push the psyche in another.

Deleuze remarked on the temporality of Bacon’s paintings, describing how variations in colour and texture in painted bodies are actually variations in time. The body is treated differently to the flat parts of the paintings, the floors and walls. They are monochrome, the body is polychrome. The body is in time, is timing. Time is made paint.<sup>93</sup> There are two times in the triptychs. Deleuze writes that there is ‘*la force du temps changeant, par la variation allotropique des corps, “au dixième de seconde,” qui fait partie de la déformation; puis la force du temps éternel, l’éternité du temps, par cette Réunion-séparation qui règne dans les triptyches, pure lumière*’.<sup>94</sup> The use of colour may also be said to guide us to a third time, the time before time. The time of noise. The eternal and the fleeting are shaped out of this time.

The abjection that emerges in *Triptych May-June 1973* is also dissipated by it. Kristeva identified literature as that which has taken the place of the sacred, and serves to both elaborate and discharge the abject.<sup>95</sup> It seems that painting is also capable of assuming this role. To return briefly to Bacon’s *Study after Velázquez*, the whips of red paint that spatter the white of papal robe, the noise in the picture, are example of abject

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<sup>90</sup> Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, p.64.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid. p.8.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid. pp.8-9.

<sup>93</sup> Deleuze, *Francis Bacon*, p.50.

<sup>94</sup> ‘*The power of changeable time, registered in the physical variations of bodies, “down to a tenth of a second,” and the power of eternal time, the eternity of time, the prevalence of their togetherness-separation in the triptychs, brings pure light*’. Ibid. p.63.

<sup>95</sup> Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, p.208.

colour. It is colour without seeming origin. It is unexplained, outside of any narrative except its apparent lack of a place in one, irrational colour.<sup>96</sup> It does not provoke the same kind of disturbance as those paintings which distort their chromatic elements through blurring and smearing, but like them it does not respect 'positions' or 'rules'.<sup>97</sup>

The explicitly religious theme of *Study after Velázquez* should not be ignored despite the painter's indications to the contrary.<sup>98</sup> There seems to be a link between faith in God and faith in figuration. Bacon's shift from figuration to what Deleuze calls the figural – manifested primarily through the isolation of the figure – parallels a move from belief to disbelief.<sup>99</sup> God is inextricably linked to the symbolic. For the believer, the Divine acts as a guarantor of meaning in the world. God gives shape to life and to the world. In the Catholic church, the Pope is God's representative on Earth. In *Study after Velázquez* this representation of the representative is troubled by the liberation of an 'excess meaning'.<sup>100</sup> This excess of meaning means the work refuses any easy shaping into a narrative. Bacon's techniques (his use of colour, his isolated (non-relational) figures, etc...) release the semiotic and mark him out as a painter to and for the faithless.

## Look Back in Anger

A musical equivalent to Bacon's pictorial practice may be found in the work of the singer and performance artist Diamanda Galás. Her 'screaming' albums such as *SchreiX* (1996), *The Masque of the Red Death* and *Plague Mass* (1991) were partly composed in response to the moral turpitude of the Catholic Church as manifested by their response to the AIDS pandemic.<sup>101</sup> Galás's most recent work *Defixiones* (2003) has examined different subject matter, seeking to draw attention to the Armenian genocide. Her vocal methods parallel Bacon's approach to painting in many ways. The singer's use of the echo (which usually acts like a shadow – performing a mirroring function and

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<sup>96</sup> This irrational, abject colour shares some similarity with Heidegger's notion of colour as that which, once it is analyzed 'in rational terms,' disappears. Abject colour is felt, not thought. For Heidegger's comments see 'The Origins of the Work of Art,' Trans. Albert Hofstadter in Heidegger, *Basic Writings*, (London: Routledge, 1993), p.172.

<sup>97</sup> Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, p.4.

<sup>98</sup> Sylvester, *Interviews with Francis Bacon*, p.24.

<sup>99</sup> Deleuze explains his notion of the 'figural' in *Francis Bacon*, p.12.

<sup>100</sup> Kristeva, 'Giotto's Joy,' p.221.



thereby contributing to the reassurance of the self), which she distorts, acts to catalogue the beginnings of a disintegration of self. Galás often uses language as the witness – the point of stasis against which to gauge change – within her work. Recognisable words are distended and distorted until the phrase disappears into screams or growls, then the process is repeated. The word returns to register its own destruction. The destruction of words is the only way to undo the losses their very existence has entailed. The exposure of the inside of words (the revelation of what they have consumed), their opening out, is achieved through a technique of misshaping. This misshaping has unshaping as its ultimate aim, the bursting of words back into noise. Galás is acutely aware of the power which lies beneath the symbolic, the behind to words.

*The voice is the primary vehicle of expression that transforms thought into sounds, thought into message. And beyond the words (with all due respect to them), the combinations of vocal and verbal energy can be overwhelming.*<sup>102</sup>

The voice shapes words, nurtures them and supports them. It is a living writing. It carries the inner-voice of thinking to the outside. There is a semiotic lining to this living writing, and this is what Galás seeks to expose. The question of transmission arises. Galás wants herself and the audience to feel her voice, as she says, *‘I have to feel it, I fry under that sound’*.<sup>103</sup> Hers is a voice endeavouring to break boundaries. The audience does not hear Galás, so much as feel her.<sup>104</sup> She is inside them. This is a putting into practice of the synaesthesia that Celan invites the reader to experience in his poetry. Galás makes you hear with your innards. The contours that separate inside and outside collapse. Galás’s voice becomes noise.

This entering of the sound into the body, vibrating the body, voicing the body, seems similar to the way the seen is reflected in the eyes of the seer. The eye takes the

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<sup>101</sup> *SchreiX* is a particularly difficult and disturbing listening experience.

<sup>102</sup> Diamanda Galás, ‘Diamanda Galás,’ in *Angry Women*, Eds. Andrea Juno & V. Vale, (San Francisco: Re/Search Publications, 1991), p.10.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid.

<sup>104</sup> Galás tries to preserve this effect of feeling her way into her audience in her recordings as well. The compact discs for *Defixiones* each carry the printed instruction ‘*Correct Playback at Maximum Volume Only*’.

outside world into itself.<sup>105</sup> The ear and the skin do likewise. The waves of light and sound that travel between bodies do so as illation. The voyage is inferred, not known. Light and sound are invisible and inaudible whilst in transit, they are not. These waves – which form different pitches and intensities, upon arriving - make up part of the unthought lining to language, perhaps they are unthinkable. Abjection is borne upon these surges of energy. This force - the unseen of sight, the unheard of hearing - is perhaps what gives particular people what is called ‘presence’. The kind of ‘being there’ that once made a photographer say of the model Gia Carangi, ‘*she had some kind of a real presence, very strong*’.<sup>106</sup> Some people seem to revolt against the symbolic in the language of their being. Bodies and styles of living have their own syntax. Occasionally bodies break with the symbolic and bring that which is usually beneath the surface to the fore. Some bodies have a semiotic aura. Those bodies that Céline found so desirable – bodies that broke with common contours – might be said to liberate the semiotic through disrupting the grammar of the body. A grammar that gets its rules from the dominant ideology of a particular historical moment. Each moment has its impossible contour (perfect grammar) which many bodies strive to emulate, the disruptive body forges its own grammar.

Galás makes the foregrounding of the semiotic the centre of her vocal practice. Like Bacon she is interested in the cage as trope and reality, ‘*a lot of my work has been about the concept of a person being caged, treated like an animal, and escaping through insanity...*’.<sup>107</sup> In her live performances she has constructed an auditory enclosure through her use of the quadraphonic sound system which envelops her audience.<sup>108</sup> This mapping and positioning of listener by sounds can then be disturbed by the muting of one or more of the speakers. Some of the music has a distinct temporality. It is reminiscent of the reverberations within Gregorian chant where each verse overlays the still sounding words

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<sup>105</sup> Assassins once held the superstition that the eyes of their victims could preserve the last image seen before death. This prompted some assassins (in fear of forensic science) to shoot out the eyes of those they had killed.

<sup>106</sup> Stephen Fried, *Thing of Beauty: The Tragedy of Supermodel Gia*, (New York: Pocket Books, 1993), p.167.

<sup>107</sup> Galás, ‘Diamanda Galás,’ p.8.

<sup>108</sup> For a brief discussion of the theatrical effects Galás prefers to use in her performance see Diamanda Galás, *The Shit of God*, (New York: High Risk, 1993), pp.2-3.



or the last.<sup>109</sup> There is often an echo in Galás, causing the listener to imagine they are hearing something projected into a cavernous space (the work *Plague Mass* was in fact performed in a cathedral). The echo disappears beneath another lament, a piercing ululation. The temporality in this vocal technique has the character of a palimpsest. There is an interweaving of the before and the present such that the before becomes the present. This compression of time denies any simple description of the temporality as linear. Nor is this cyclical time, or the monumental time ‘*without cleavage or escape*’<sup>110</sup> that haunts all subjectivity. Like Bacon’s paintings, it is an effort to access the time before time, the shapeless time out of which times began. Time need space. The time before time is without space.

### Writing to Noise

I have suggested Bacon is a faithless painter. Galás seeks to expose the hypocrisy of the Catholic church. Celan is not a writer who immediately appears to be without faith. The poet seems to believe in something, even if that something is nothing. The poem *Psalm*, in which the poet writes the line ‘*Gelobst seist du, Niemand*,’<sup>111</sup> displays this negative belief. Either the poet believes ‘no one’ can be spoken to, or the poem is an admission that there is no one to speak to. In the poem *wir* (we) and *dir* (you) are differentiated. This means ‘no one’ cannot be taken to mean everyone, there cannot be an outside to everyone or everyone would not be ‘everyone’. Perhaps we should read ‘*Niemand*’ as no more than a name, not a description but a nomination. It identifies ‘some one’ under the rubric of ‘no one’. Celan is saying ‘*dir*’ are ‘*Niemand*’. If we were to take this ‘no one’ to signify God, as the title seems to suggest, then either God *is* but is without status, or God is *not*. After the ashes of Auschwitz, the idea of the Divine has become a debased and degraded one. To worship such a God is to mock worship. Celan does not mock ‘no one’ however, he writes ‘*Dir zulieb wollen wir bluhn. Dir*

<sup>109</sup> Examples of this technique are provided by the tracks ‘Confessional (Give me Sodomy or give me Death)’ from the album *Plague Mass* and ‘O.P.M.’ from *SchreiX*.

<sup>110</sup> Julia Kristeva, ‘Women’s Time,’ in *The Kristeva Reader*, (London: Blackwell, 1986), p.191.

<sup>111</sup> ‘*Praised be your name, no one*’ (Trans. Michael Hamburger). Celan, *Selected Poems*, p.178.

*entgegen*'.<sup>112</sup> He speaks to 'no one' as the possibility there is 'no one,' perhaps not the certainty. Derrida writes of the poem: '*To speak to no one, in the risk, each time, singularly, that there is no one to bless, no one for blessing is this not the only chance for blessing? For an act of faith?*'.<sup>113</sup> The only possible faith is an impossible faith. Celan writes of flowering, knowing that this flowering may be towards the void. In this uncertain time, we are '*ein nichts*,' we are a nothing.

Philippe Sollers has read Bacon's art practice as one which renders the question 'to be or not to be' redundant, revolving instead around the question of how 'to be and not to be'.<sup>114</sup> We might read Celan's poetry as unfolding across a similar dichotomy, that not of being or nothingness but of being and nothingness. Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe has written of the '*dizziness*' which we '*experience*' whilst reading Celan as '*an experience of nothingness*'.<sup>115</sup> It is the dizziness of the non-experience, that of Heidegger's anguish or of Bataille's laughter. Nothingness is understood in Heideggerian terms by Lacoue-Labarthe, as that which is ever present yet manifests itself only at particular moments, such as when the individual experiences angst.

Nothing is then, at times, itself an experience (and as such something). Experience has to be *perceived* in order to be. Nothingness may 'noth' all the time but most of the time it does so in obscurity. I live the everyday as an event which is only occasionally punctured / punctuated by what I recognise as an experience. It is in these rare moments of recognition that I encounter nothingness. If Celan's poetry is experienced in the way Lacoue-Labarthe suggests then it is not 'read' in the usual sense of the word, rather we read ourselves into a space without significance, where 'we' are not. The self disappears but not in a catastrophic way. Poetry is a clearing of space. It is only through this space that presence can come to be. The experience of dizziness is one that cannot be experienced, it is not lived. The '*non-form of pure non-event*'<sup>116</sup> that is poetry as experience, that is poetry as nothingness, *is not*. To be able to think ourselves

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<sup>112</sup> '*For your sake we shall flower. Towards you*'. Ibid. John Felstiner suggests that because of the double meaning of *entgegen* (both 'toward' and 'against') the second line would best be rendered as '*In thy spite*'. See Felstiner, *Paul Celan*, p.168.

<sup>113</sup> Jacques Derrida, 'Shibboleth: For Paul Celan,' Trans. Joshua Wilner, in *Word Traces*, Ed. Aris Fioretos, (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1994), p.46.

<sup>114</sup> Philippe Sollers, *Les passions de Francis Bacon*, (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1996), p.136.

<sup>115</sup> Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, *Poetry as Experience*, Trans. Andrea Tarnowski, (California, Stanford University Press, 1999), p.19.



we need to be able to think of an outside to ourselves. 'I am what I am, because I am not that' is not enough. Self and other require a 'nothing' on which to ground their *somethingness*. The nothing cannot be known, because to know nothing you would need to *be* nothing, to not be. Nothingness necessitates a leap of faith. Lacoue-Labarthe describes poems as '*pure wanting-to-say nothing, nothingness, that against which and through which there is presence, what is*'.<sup>117</sup> The poem can only 'say' if it says nothing, because saying *kneads* nothing. The poem must not say to say not. Nothing is the silence that births speech, which shapes itself out of nothing. Nothing is what we are born out of. It is what abjection protects us from. The dizziness, the moment when I am and am not, the experience that occurs but as a none-occurrence, is a moment of abjection. Kristeva in fact describes abjection as a '*sight-clouding dizziness*,' a seeing nothing.<sup>118</sup> Abjection is the impossible instant when the subject faces the void out of which it became, the all that is the Nothing. It '*seems to emanate from an exorbitant outside or inside, ejected beyond the scope of the possible, the tolerable, the thinkable*'.<sup>119</sup> When Kristeva writes that the abject is not an object (except in opposition to I) this is because the abject is not. The abject is however '*not nothing, either*'.<sup>120</sup> It is '*a something that I do not recognise as a thing*'.<sup>121</sup> This could either mean that abjection is not nothing, or that nothing is not nothing, it is instead *no thing*. It is useful to look to Merleau-Ponty to clarify what nothing is/is not. Merleau-Ponty writes:

*It is precisely because Being and Nothingness, the yes and the no, cannot be blended together like two ingredients that, when we see being, nothingness is immediately there, and not in the margin like the zone of non-vision around our field of vision, but over the whole expanse of what we see, as what installs it and disposes it before us as spectacle.*<sup>122</sup>

The something is braided to the nothing like the symbolic is braided to the semiotic. They are exclusive and inseparable. Kristeva writes of the abject as that which is not 'recognised' as thing. She shares the belief with Merleau-Ponty that Being exists in

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<sup>116</sup> Ibid. p.18.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid. p.20.

<sup>118</sup> Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, p.3.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid. p.1.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid. p.2.

<sup>121</sup> Ibid.

<sup>122</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, p.66.

and as perception. Perception itself is something, and is able to perceive other something's, because all something's front the void. If I look at a coffee cup I am seeing something and I am seeing a void, but I avoid the void.<sup>123</sup> I am blind to it because to see it would be to see myself, to see my self as what self is; which is, precisely, this void, the nothing. The before-child that is plenitude – child as part of the Mother, not apart from the Mother – *is* this *not*, is not. The Mother must be rejected; a space must be created, for the child to be. The Mother must become the nothing, must unbecome. It is, however, not so simple. It would be a mistake to believe that the child makes the Mother 'something' whilst it, it's self, is not. The child is a force of memory that reminds the Mother of nothing, of the nothingness underlying both, and also of the nothing of the Mother's (M)Other. The birth of the child into the world and into language is only felt as a loss to protect the Mother from the knowledge that the child was, in a certain sense, never there. The sense of loss replaces a worse feeling, that of melancholia. It is also an illusion which is necessary for the child to believe that it has become *something*, that it *is*. Abjection is a protective mechanism that preserves this mis-recognition, yet also acts as an unwelcome memory of the nothing. It is the impossible that gifts us the possible. Merleau-Ponty writes that: '*The negative becomes a sort of quality precisely because one fixes it in its power of refusal and evasion*'.<sup>124</sup> There is a trap inherent in the thinking of the negative. If we say what the negative 'is' not, if we 'say' the negative, we destroy its negativity. If we maintain that the negative is not, we cannot avoid elevating it to a sort of positivity, we confer upon it a sort of being, since through and through and absolutely it is *nothing*. It has this non-quality which is nothingness.

Nothing is something because we think and talk about it. It is a part of language, and as scription it is made material. Even thought is inscription, it is a simultaneous writing and reading across the text of the mind. The question we need to ask at this juncture is whether language requires nothing, a non-language, in order to be. Derrida's most frequently cited statement is that '*il n'y a pas de hors-texte*'.<sup>125</sup> There is not an outside (to) text. Nothing is text-free. As John Mowitt points out, with characteristic

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<sup>123</sup> The coffee cup is shape defined against the shapeless. It is sound within the noise. Underneath the coffee cup – beneath the recognition – there is nothing.

<sup>124</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, p.67.



clarity, Derrida's statement means that '*there is no inside*' to the text as well.<sup>126</sup> In addition to the destruction of distance between a '*disciplinary framework*' and the '*space it governs*', between a student and their object of study, between a reader and writing, that such a statement implies, for me there is also 'no inside' because *no* is *inside*.<sup>127</sup> Derrida would, perhaps, suggest that the something (in this instance, text) must carry the trace of the nothing within it to exist as it does. The trace is that which must be present as an absence. It appears similar to the nothing, if we think of the nothing as what is needed for things to mean, but needed as a not. The trace is the relation that exists as non-relation. It ostensibly shares the quality of being 'is' and 'is not' with the nothing. Are the two different and the same? *Il n'y a pas de trace, le pas n'est qu'un trace*. It is time to tread carefully. Is nothing text? If nothing is not text, then what is it? If text is not...? Is text a product of perception? Merleau-Ponty has pointed out that once we talk or think about something, even nothing, it becomes substantial. Nothing is text because I am reading it and writing it, but what about the '*pas de deux*', the '*pas*' of '*pas*', the '*pas*' beneath '*pas*', the nothing once it is removed from itself, from word, from shape. What about the nothing that I am not reading and writing about, the nothing that is not this text? *Is* a nothing which I cannot write? And if it is *not*...?

The play of the trace ensures that absence can never be absolute, each time I think something that is absent from absence, a nothing behind and/or beyond the text, I present and textify it. I textify that there is no outside of text, no(text)no. I give textimony to the fact that nothing is not text-free. What if I could not read? I write illiteracy. But what if I could not read because there was *nothing* to read? If I experienced a non-experience. Non-experience is the word I give to this 'nothing'. I make nothing into something. But can I give this 'nothing' I have *made* to nothing? Nothing is *not* there to receive this gift of language. I cannot know nothing the no-thing, only nothing the word-thing. I can only know language, language is knowing. Lacoue-Labarthe's 'nothing' is a *caesura* (a

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<sup>125</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, Trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1976), p.158.

<sup>126</sup> John Mowitt, *Text: The Genealogy of an Antidisciplinary Object*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 1992), p.97.

<sup>127</sup> Ibid.

wording, an annihilation of nothing by some word-thing), '*a pure suspension of occurrence*,'<sup>128</sup> it is not nothing.

We might ask if 'nothing' exists (although of course it cannot exist, in the normal sense we ascribe to existence) if we do not recognise or perceive it. I understand 'recognition' to be the translation of a signified into a signified. I perceive the signified *something*, that something is then translated into another signified selected from the mind dictionary. 'Something' is transformed into 'coffee', 'cold' or 'incomprehension', for example. Something can even become 'something'. Recognition is the after-event of perception. Perception is the prime-reader. It is the sensing of signifieds. It should not be confused with knowing, knowing occurs at the level of recognition. Signification is, above all, a sensation and sensation is, above all, a signification. Is not 'not' before I sense it? Do I coat 'not' in reading/writing, sense it, shape it, sound it, text it? Or is it always already as text? What about text? *Is* text before I perceive it? I could rephrase this as '*is* perception before I perceive it'? Or, perhaps, am I/i before I perceive? When does the subject begin to read and write itself? Is it 'not' before it *is* subject? It is possible that I perceive before I know I do, such that we should really speak in terms of passive and active perceptions. Until I am able to recognise, I perceive passively. There are thus passive and active signifieds. The active signified is the self-reflexive act of perception, the '*I am perceiving that I am perceiving*'. I perceive problems with such an interpretation, of the kind '*I am perceiving that I am perceiving that I am perceiving*'. Third order signification and fourth and fifth and on and on...although can the infinite be perceived? Even if passive signification *is* (and certainly Kristeva seems to conceive of a passive symbolic<sup>129</sup>) it is not nothing. The question as to whether nothing 'is' or is 'not' outside the text is perhaps unanswerable. Nothing might be thought of as framing the text. The '*n'y a pas*' is what gives shape to the text, what allows it to possess an inside and an outside. This frame - nothingness - abuts the text and abuts a nothing that is beyond the scription that is '*n'y a pas*'. A frame that '*is essentially constructed and*

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<sup>128</sup> Lacoue-Labarthe, *Poetry as Experience*, p.19.

<sup>129</sup> '*...a being-there of the symbolic that a father might or might not embody*'. Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, p.10. The symbolic appears to precede the I, which upon arrival will activate it.



*therefore fragile: such would be the essence or truth of the frame*'.<sup>130</sup> The frame is permeated by text such that it is and is not text. The frame cannot contain the text, it is simultaneously contained by text and containing text. The frame is something, the nothing text. Text cannot be believed in without the belief in an(other) text, the nothing. It imagines a space outside of itself in order to posit itself as text. This speculative outside is required in order for text to perceive itself as such. This imaginary exterior - the '*n'y a pas*' - opens up a position from which to look inside, a position from which text can 'read' itself, can come to *be*. Text cannot know itself unless it can first unknow itself. I am reminded here of an observation that Kelly Osborne, Ozzy Osborne's daughter, once made: '*People ask me what it's like being Ozzy's daughter - well, I don't know what it's not like*'.<sup>131</sup> The not-knowing is necessary for all self-knowledge. At the level of subjectivity this is what abjection accomplishes. Abjection at once protects us from the 'nothing' out of which we begin, yet at the same time reminds us of it and thus allow us to be. The abject is our frame.

## The Silence

Paul Celan is *the* poet of this silence, of the nothing, the *n'y a pas*. He understands that there is something that he cannot know, something that he cannot know because it is no longer, because it is not. All his poetry is written in the knowledge of this not-knowing. For that reason it is necessary to consider the relationship between nothing and language, to consider the fact that there should be no relationship. Celan writes in the shadow of traumatic events. Severe psychic trauma can take two forms, forms which I might be called 'traumatic plenitude' and 'traumatic nihilism'. Traumatic plenitude describes the condition wherein a traumatic experience has filled a person completely. That person is entirely the traumatic experience, the person is therefore *not*, the mind has no outside from which to think this experience. To borrow from the language of my analysis of Francis Bacon's paintings, it could be said that in a case of traumatic plenitude the mind has no internal witness. The mind *is* the problem, hence it cannot see

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<sup>130</sup> Jacques Derrida, *The Truth in Painting*, Trans. Geoff Bennington & Ian McLeod, (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1987), p.73.

<sup>131</sup> Kelly Osborne, 'Born to be Wild,' in *Observer Magazine*, 26<sup>th</sup> January 2003, p.20.

beyond the problem and think through it. The person lives the trauma rather than remembers it. Traumatic nihilism is a condition within which the mind rejects the existence of the traumatic experience completely. The traumatic experience only manifests itself by not doing so. The experience takes on the mantle of the textual-nothing. It is present as an absence. In this situation trauma does not overwhelm the mind, it hides in the mind. The mind thinks around a void. It avoids thinking certain thoughts. Traumatic plenitude is the experience of trauma that causes flash-backs and nightmares, hyper-sensitivity, and many of the symptoms that fall under the heading PTSD.<sup>132</sup> Traumatic nihilism is trauma experienced as the horror of the nothing, of what appears to be an empty space in the mind.

Celan's poetry shares an affinity with the second condition. It may be read as an attempt to write his way into the hole within. This attempt is made in the knowledge that the writing can never reach the non-experience. Celan concluded the poem 'Aschenglorie' with the famous line: '*No one bears witness for the witness*'.<sup>133</sup> This no one includes language. Celan's trauma is the product as much of what he has not experienced (here meant in terms of the historical context of Celan's Holocaust experience, for instance he was at a labour camp, not a concentration camp or an extermination camp) as what he has. In his poetry efforts are made to write away the insensitivity of perception, to write beyond the belief that all that *is* is that which is perceived. Celan writes against perception, against writing. The mind *writes* the traumatic experience as nothing because it does not wish to confront it. Celan over-writes this nothing writing of the traumatised mind. He insists that the mind *read* all its thoughts, read into the nothing. This endeavour to reveal these invisible ink experiences is complicated by a simultaneous desire to communicate the futility of writing. Celan wants to write out of writing, to write nothing. To write that he *believes* in nothing would be a misnomer. He has no belief. Celan's poetry is rich with religious imagery but he is not a religious poet. His late poems resonate with the language and imagery of a faith. They are echoes of a old belief, growing gradually fainter, fading away. There is no spiritual

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<sup>132</sup> For a brief summation of the origin of the term PTSD (Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder) and the problems inherent in using it as a catch-all clinical description of trauma, see Ruth Leys, *Trauma: A Genealogy*, (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2000), pp.5-8.



awakening in the last, most elliptical, verses. The poems grow closer and closer to the nothing that is 'left'. More compact. The posthumously published collections of *Schneepart* (1971) and *Zeitgehöft* (1976) may be what prompted Primo Levi's comments about Celan in his essay 'On Obscure Writing'. Levi writes of the poetry of Celan and Trakl (both of whom committed suicide) as a kind of '*pre-killing, a not-wanting-to-be, a flight from the world of which the intentional death was the crown*'.<sup>134</sup> Celan's poetry forms part of a gradual death by his own hand. He is writing himself to death, writing himself to nothing. Words insult by their tangibility. They give too much matter to the dead, offering an afterlife where there should be nothing. Celan wants to write for the dead but the only appropriate writing would be a wordless one. The pared poetry Celan wrote towards the end is close to an unwording. The words are carefully chosen, kept tight together, holding multiple meanings. This produces an excess of sense. A too much. Teetering close to nonsense. The words have no space. No room to breath:

*Die Posaunstelle  
tief im glühenden  
Leertext  
in Fackelhöhe,  
im Zeitloch:*

*hör dich ein  
mit dem Mund.*<sup>135</sup>

The words gesture towards the void...the hole...the lacuna...empty words.<sup>136</sup> Levi calls Celan's late compositions an '*atrocious chaos without a glimmer of light*'.<sup>137</sup> This is twilight writing. Night is falling. The hole within is becoming the hole without. The black cracks, the lettering...fissures within the page. These letters have no meaning, they are *not*. They cleave the paper. The glow is the noise that beckons from the bottom of the word-voids. The warmth of reunion with nothingness. Of union. These words are not to

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<sup>133</sup> Felstiner, *Paul Celan*, p.223. The original German is '*Niemand zeugt für den Zeugen*'. Paul Celan, 'Aschenglorie,' in *Gedichte 2*, (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1975), p.72.

<sup>134</sup> Levi, 'On Obscure Writing,' p.161.

<sup>135</sup> '*The Trumpet Part / deep in the glowing / lacuna / at lamp height / in the time hole: / listen your way in with your mouth*' (Trans. Michael Hamburger). Celan, *Selected Poems*, p.351.

<sup>136</sup> Felstiner recommends translating '*Leertext*' as 'text-void'. Felstiner, *Paul Celan*, p.271. 'Empty-text' is another possibility.

<sup>137</sup> Levi, 'On Obscure Writing,' p.161.

be read, they are to be climbed into. The reader must step through the page. Into the word-mouth. Step into the outside of inside and outside. This is a kind of death. Levi is right to see this shadow, *'this darkness (which) grows from page to page until the last inarticulate babble consternates like the rattle of a dying man, and in fact that is just what it is'*.<sup>138</sup> The babble is the noise. The death of all things. The no thing. It is a writing back to the before of becoming. A kind of suicide. A *'language of the lifeless'*.<sup>139</sup> It is a writing inwards not outwards. As Adorno suggests, it is a hermetic writing. One not meant to mean but to shock.<sup>140</sup> There is no sound in Celan. His *'poems want to speak of the most extreme horror through silence'*.<sup>141</sup>

### Heard but not Seen

Levi's remarks on Celan also emphasise the absence of light in the poetry and also its coldness, he describes the reader as gripped *'as in an ice-cold vice'*.<sup>142</sup> It is specular and tactile reading. The darkness Levi perceived had importance for Celan from the beginning. 'Todesfuge' begins black:

*Schwarze Milch der Frühe wir trinken sie abends  
wir trinken sie mittags und morgens wir trinnen sie nachts  
wir trinken und trinken*<sup>143</sup>

The black milk...the life-giver in mourning...the food of childhood...made malignant. Black...the colour that absorbs all colours...the hole. Bruno Bettelheim reads this black milk as a poison masquerading as nourishment, as a metaphor for a mother murdering her child, *'when one is forced to drink black milk from dawn to dusk, whether in the death camps of Nazi Germany, or while lying in a possibly luxurious crib, but there subjected to the unconscious death wishes of what overtly may be a conscientious mother - in either situation, a living soul has death for a master'*.<sup>144</sup> The black milk may be a reference

<sup>138</sup> Ibid.

<sup>139</sup> Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, Trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor, (London: Athlone, 1999), p.322.

<sup>140</sup> Ibid. p.321.

<sup>141</sup> Ibid. p.320.

<sup>142</sup> Levi, 'On Obscure Writing,' p161.

<sup>143</sup> *'Black milk of daybreak we drink it at sundown / we drink it at noon in the morning we drink it at night / we drink and we drink it'* (Trans. Michael Hamburger), Celan, *Selected Poems*, p.63.

<sup>144</sup> Bruno Bettelheim, *Surviving and Other Essays*, (London: Thames and Hudson, 1979), p.111.



Celan had read to what was literally drunk in the camps.<sup>145</sup> The black milk may be language. The ears drink language from dawn until dusk. It is difficult to close the ear, to cease to drink the sounds of the world.<sup>146</sup> *'The ear is the organ of space and time, and it's always listening to and locating something'*.<sup>147</sup> The ear swallows sound, digests it, thereby situating the self in the world of things. In the camps the ear absorbs the sounds of starvation, the sounds of destruction, the mocking sound of music, the sounds of the dying, the death rattle. The many languages, *'des jurons en russe, en allemand, en polonais, en français'*.<sup>148</sup> A veritable Babel.<sup>149</sup> The sounds of Auschwitz or Treblinka. Sounds that have ceased. Replaced by the violence of a forgetful silence. Celan is not silent.

There is at least one recording of Celan reciting 'Todesfuge'.<sup>150</sup> Felstiner describes it as giving the listener *'quickenings, emphases, retards, pauses, caustic articulation, and even a phrase misspoken'*.<sup>151</sup> The recording is and is not Celan. In the process of making this recording something happened to Celan's voice (a voice which is only a part of Celan the man). In a tape-recording a magnetic 'image' of a sound is stored onto a tape. The 'image' is made up of magnetized iron oxide or chromium dioxide granules in a magnetic emulsion. Given the date of the recording, Celan's voice's 'image' would be made up of iron (otherwise known as ferrous) oxide. The voice is given form, is transformed, in this act. Magnetic tapes are extremely sensitive and their previous magnetic history threatens the quality of the recording. This sensitivity is given the technical name 'hysteresis'. As the tape played it would have been subjected to a biasing signal which accompanied the signal of Celan's voice. The biasing signal 'stirs' the

<sup>145</sup> Felstiner, *Paul Celan*, p.33.

<sup>146</sup> As John Mowitt states, *'hearing is omnidirectional and automatically receptive'*. Mowitt, *percussion: drumming, beating, striking*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), p.47.

<sup>147</sup> Berio, *Two Interviews*, p.33.

<sup>148</sup> *'Cursing in Russian, German, Polish, French'*. David Rousset, *L'Univers concentrationnaire*, (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1965), p.31.

<sup>149</sup> Wolfgang Sofsky, *The Order of Terror: The Concentration Camp*, Trans. William Templer, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), p.156.

<sup>150</sup> It was made in 1958 for the publishing firm Günther Neske. See the sleeve-notes to Paul Celan, *Ich hörte sagen: Gedichte und Prosa*, der Hörverlag, 2 cassettes. Diamanda Galás provides her own notable reading of the poem on the album *Defixiones*.

<sup>151</sup> Felstiner, *Paul Celan*, p.32. The line Celan misspeaks is *'Er ruft stecht tiefer ins Erdreich ihr einen andern singet und spielt'*. *'He calls out jab deeper in the earth you lot you other sing now and play'*. He says instead *"...ihr andern spielt weiter zum Tanz auf"*. *'...you other play on for the dance'*. This is actually the end of a later line. See Celan, *Selected Poems*, pp.62-63.

magnetization of the tape to make sure each part of the signal (the voice) has the same magnetic starting conditions for recording. A recording is a process of stirring and storing. We might compare it to the way we stir paint to make sure it has the same consistency before we apply it. The application of the paint is like the fixing of the aural image against the tape. When we listen to the recording, we do not hear Celan's voice but a representation of it. The voice vanishes in the act that seeks to preserve it. I hear an electronic likeness of that voice, an figuring generated by the reading of the magnetic image. The technology of preservation protects through destruction. I do hear *something* however, something I would like to think of as the echo of Celan's voice. The intercession of technology cannot separate me entirely from this voice.

What is this voice though? It is the voice of a dead man. A voice from beyond the grave. It is a *memento mori*. What Roland Barthes said about photography is equally applicable to the tape-recording. To listen to such a recording is to enter into contact with death. In an interview about photography Barthes declared:

*If photography is to be discussed on a serious level, it must be discussed in relation to death. It's true that a photograph is a witness, but a witness of something that is no more. Even if the person in the picture is still alive, it's a moment of this subject's existence that was photographed, and this moment is gone. This is an enormous trauma for humanity, a trauma endlessly renewed. Each reading of a photo, and there are billions worldwide in a day, each perception and reading of a photo is implicitly, in a repressed manner, a contact with what has ceased to exist, a contact with death.*<sup>152</sup>

The photograph and the tape-recording are both forms of witnessing, but what they testify to is *not*. They witness 'nothing'. The technologies record their failure to fulfil the task of preservation for which they were founded. They are always too late. For Barthes, the photograph provides a contact with that which has '*ceased to exist*', that which is no longer, which is not, which has returned to nothing. There is *something*, the contact, the photograph, the recording, but it is not *the* thing, this *thing* has been left behind, has ceased to be, is dead. Death is outside the text. It is outside the cultural shaping of life and death. The death after death, the undiscovered country from whose bourn no traveller returns. Celan's voice returns from this country. He is dead but persists. The recording of Celan



reading 'Todesfuge' is a speaking from this nothing. It is a voice without obvious origin. We see the tape-recorder but not the magnetic image of the voice. We hear a voice without a body. The voice of a dead man. An acousmatic voice. Michel Chion describes the acousmatic as being those sounds which are heard but whose cause or source cannot be seen.<sup>153</sup> He goes on to say:

*...this voice without a place that belongs to the acousmètre takes us back to an archaic, original stage: of the first months of life or even of before birth, during which the voice was everything and it was everywhere (but bear in mind that this "everywhere" quality is nameable only retrospectively – the concept can arise for the subject who no longer occupies the undifferentiated everywhere'.<sup>154</sup>*

Celan's exilic voice – a voice without a place – carries the listener back to a time before listening. The reading brings back the timeless time of the voice. Voice as all. Noise. The words have shape but the voice in the recording has no immediately recognisable contour (the contour which is given in any origin). It is not from anywhere.

Barthes thoughts about photography also raise the question of the relationship between time and nothingness. It seems that for Barthes, 'nothing' is the passage of time. It is a sentiment Paul Celan seems to have shared. He recognised that reading is also a repressed contact with death. Writing is reading. I read the mind and write. The mind reads and writes in an impossible simultaneity. The poet became conscious that he was always leaving something behind. Writing is always a leaving, a process of separation, even though it is also ostensibly a technology of preservation. Feeling falls away in the act of writing it. The writer tries to catch up with an experience that they have already passed by, that is past. Translation (and time is the ultimate-translator) is destruction (time is not outside writing, time is a form of writing). To call something into words is not to make it available for recall but to efface it. Something is not when it is called 'something', it becomes something else, letters, ink, typeface. It changes shape. Something is outside the text. Something, everything, is nothing. Language is not a

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<sup>152</sup> Roland Barthes, 'On Photography,' in Roland Barthes, *The Grain of the Voice: Interviews 1962-1980*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), p.356.

<sup>153</sup> Michel Chion, *The Voice of Cinema*, Trans. Claudia Gorbman, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), p.18.

<sup>154</sup> Ibid. p.27.

prison-house but a charnel-house. The inscription of the word, inscription in any form or thought, is an epitaph. Writing is erasure. Celan did not *write* poetry.

It is only once we have this in mind that we should read 'Todesfuge', the poem that it was rumoured prompted Adorno to state that it would be barbaric to write poetry after Auschwitz.<sup>155</sup> 'Todesfuge', written in German but first published in Romanian as 'Tangoul Mortii' or 'Tango of Death', is a poem about writing. To write in German was a problem, the language was implicated in the horrors it was seeking to describe.<sup>156</sup> Celan is writing in German to Germany. The *mann* in the house in 'Todesfuge' also writes in German to Germany, '*der schreibt wenn es dunkelt nach Deutschland*'.<sup>157</sup> Celan and the Nazi share a language. The serpents that the man plays with are words, the same curls and coils that Celan now describes him with. The language has a history. Celan takes language out of time to escape the contagion of etymology. He makes '*the German language take flight on a line of escape*'.<sup>158</sup> What Deleuze and Guattari say of Kafka's use of the German language might, at times, equally be said of Celan: '*He will push it toward a deterritorialization that will no longer be saved by culture or by myth, that will be an absolute deterritorialization, even if it is slow, sticky, coagulated. To bring language slowly and progressively to the desert. To use syntax in order to cry, to give a syntax to the cry*'.<sup>159</sup> In their book *Towards a Minor Literature*, Deleuze and Guattari compare Kafka to Céline in that the two write '*with a kind of minor music*'.<sup>160</sup> This music is the music I discussed in the last chapter, the music that opens writing to the semiotic, that frees the drives. Celan does not write into this music but out of it. His syntax screams. It screams to have shape. He writes in noise, as noise. His writing is as an after effect of the impulses which Céline discharged in his writing but which the Third Reich

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<sup>155</sup> Michael Rothberg, *Traumatic Realism: The Demands of Holocaust Representation*, (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2000), p.47.

<sup>156</sup> Language cannot be owned however. It can resist as much as aid an oppressor. In her report of his trial, Hannah Arendt wrote of the Nazi Adolf Eichmann's '*heroic fight with the German language, which invariably defeats him*'. Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (London: Penguin, 1994), p.48.

<sup>157</sup> '*he writes when dusk falls to Germany...*' (trans. Michael Hamburger), Celan, *Selected Poems*, p.63.

<sup>158</sup> Gilles Deleuze & Felix Guattari, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, Trans. Dana Polan. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), p.26.

<sup>159</sup> Ibid.

<sup>160</sup> Ibid.



discharged as physical violence, as torture, as suffering, as mass murder. He is concerned with the horrors perpetrated by the Nazis.

Celan is concerned with the problem of this horror appearing at all. Horror is *not* when it is translated, when it is written. Horror is not a word, the horror is not in 'horror'. Horror is unwording. It is unshaping. It is men, women and children made ashes...vanishing. Horror is nothing. The power of horror is its nothingness. It is abjection which protects us from nothing, which causes us to turn away from the dead. Writing (in the limited sense of ink on a page) can be likened to abjection for the simple reason that it gives the suggestion of something. It *rejects* nothing. Inscription requires surface and point, it needs things. The means however that the more Celan wrote, the further he sensed he was moving away from the horrors he was trying to write about. The black milk is writing, the balm of the pen. Unstoppable writing. '*Schwarze Milch der Frühe wir trinken sie abends wir trinken sie mittags und morgens wir trinken sie nachts wir trinken und trinken*'. The absence of punctuation in 'Todesfuge' emphasises the endlessness of writing. Writing, and writing, and writing, creeps in this petty pace from day to day, to the last syllable of recorded time. Time is writing. The camps must, at least partly, be outside time or it is too late. Celan knew that to write something about horror he must not write, we must not read, there can be no text. His answer to the violence that is writing was the idea of the breath-turn. The breath-turn is the nothing. Celan described the breath-turn during a speech he gave on the occasion of receiving the Georg Büchner prize in 1960. The speech is usually referred to as *The Meridien*. It is perhaps the most important piece of writing about writing from the Twentieth Century, because it is not about writing. The speech is about how not to write. '*I am talking about a poem that does not exist!*'.<sup>161</sup>

*The Meridien* teaches us that art is velocity. Art, of which poetry is (a)part. '*Art makes for a certain distance from the I. Art requires that we travel a certain space in a certain direction, on a certain road*'.<sup>162</sup> Celan believes that poetry only exists in moments where the momentum of 'art' is resisted. It exists in the invitation to turn against its own momentum. Poetry exists only when it allows the poem to overtake it. Poetry is a pause.

<sup>161</sup> Paul Celan, *Collected Prose*, Trans. Rosmarie Waldrop (Manchester: Carcanet, 1986), p.51.

<sup>162</sup> Ibid. p.44. Celan is engaged in a commentary on Büchner's *Lenz* at this point.

It is an *Atemwende*, 'a turning of our breath'.<sup>163</sup> A point of suspension. 'Nobody can tell how long the pause for breath - hope and thought - will last. 'Speed', which has always been 'outside', has gained yet more speed'.<sup>164</sup> Hope and thought exist in an instant that is no instant, in death. Breathing is living. The breath-turn, the moment that is not inhalation or exhalation, is outside life. It is outside the narrative that is each breath - an in and an out - a beginning and an end to an action. Poetry is an attack upon narrative. The breath-turn is one form of this offensive. The breath-turn is the nothing. The noise.<sup>165</sup> The 'farthest limit of the I-voice,' it doesn't even involve a voice, it is a *pre-vocal expression, even before the air in the airway rattles the larynx*'.<sup>166</sup> Perhaps it is even further than this limit. The I-voice fallen silent. The end of the I. Hope and thought exist in the nothing, in the unwritten. The breath-turn is not a pause whilst speaking, or a space between words on a page. The breath-turn is the space between the words on the page and the page, it is the pause between the pause and speech. It is not spoken. It cannot be written. It cannot be thought. It is 'not'. Celan explains that the '*poem holds its ground, if you will permit me yet another extreme formulation, the poem holds its ground on its own margin. In order to endure, it constantly calls and pulls itself back from an 'already-no-more' into a 'still-here'*'.<sup>167</sup> The breath-turn is the already-no-more. A death between breaths. Abject.

The 'Wirk Nicht Voraus' from *Lichtzwang* (1970) illustrates this. It is useful to quote the poem in its entirety:

*Wirk nicht voraus,  
sende nicht aus,  
steh  
herein:*

*durchgründet vom Nichts,  
ledig allen*

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<sup>163</sup> Ibid. p.47.

<sup>164</sup> Ibid. p.48.

<sup>165</sup> The breath-turn is perhaps the *aleph*, which in Hebrew 'represents nothing more than the position taken by the larynx when a word begins with a vowel'. It is the moment in which a shape is chosen. The *aleph* can also 'be said to denote the source of all articulate sound, and indeed the Kabbalists always regarded it as the spiritual root of all other letters, encompassing in its essence the whole alphabet'. It is that out of which voice (shaped sound) originates. 'To hear the *aleph* is to hear next to nothing; it is the preparation for all audible language, but in itself conveys no determinate specific meaning'. See Gershom Scholem, *On the Kabbalah and its Symbolism*, Trans. Ralph Mannheim, (New York: Schocken Books, 1996), p.30.

<sup>166</sup> Chion, *The Voice in Cinema*, p.53.

<sup>167</sup> Celan, *Selected Prose*, p.49.



gebets,  
feinfügig, nach  
der Vor-Schrift,  
unüberholbar,

nehm ich dich auf,  
statt aller  
Ruhe.<sup>168</sup>

The poems opening entreaty should be understood as asking the reader to slow the forward movement of the mind. Merleau-Ponty suggests in *The Visible and the Invisible* that reality is in a sense always deferred: ‘...“reality” does not belong definitively to any particular perception...in this sense it lies always further on’.<sup>169</sup> Celan wants to avoid the breaking up of perceptual appearances, those continual replacements that constitute everyday existence. He wants a static perception - perhaps we could conceive of it through the act of writing, a writing that stops mid-sentence to allow the ink to catch up - a perception that allows a particular experience to engulf words rather than to be engulfed by them. It might be read as a call for perceptual suicide. Perception is a process but Celan wants it to become an end-point. He requires perception to bear witness to a stilled reality, a reality which is *really* nothing. He wants ‘*a terrifying silence*’.<sup>170</sup> We move to Be. Something *is* only as a form of momentum because it is momentum which gives it form. You move these words to be by your reading them. You shape them. The sentence only *is* through the wanderings of the eye. Celan wants quiescence: the end of motion and the silence which that brings, the noise. This is not tranquility, it is ‘*statt aller Ruhe*’, because it opens up a space within which the instant must be confronted. It demands another temporality of us, a timeless one. Normally we travel on the hands of the clock, here we must watch them pass us by. Faith is a forward and upward looking. The ‘breath-turn’ is a turn away from faith. It is in the turn that experience is found(ed). Experience as non-experience.

The ‘*Vor-Schrift*’ of the poem – the pre-script - is the nothing out of which writing exploded. It is the noise before the sound. The pre-script is that which is always

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<sup>168</sup> ‘Do not work ahead, / do not send forth, / stand / into it, enter: / transfounded by nothingness, / unburdened of all / prayer, / microstructured in heeding / the pre-script / unovertakable, / I make you at home, / instead of all / rest (Trans. Michael Hamburger). Celan, *Selected Poems*, p.323.

<sup>169</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, p.41.

already overwritten. It is what Celan wants to write. It is a hard task. If something is in our wake we cannot overtake it, it can only catch us up. Celan wants to travel backwards whilst going forwards. He wants to write us to the underneath of writing, to what hides beneath the scroll of a pen yet resides above the page that it travels across. It is difficult to think because thinking is writing. To think the nothing is to nihilate it. It requires poetic thinking. Poetry *is* when it is not. Language needs to exceed itself, like the colour that exceeds meaning in Bacon's paintings. It needs to be thought through and out of itself. The black milk may be such a thinking. The black of the black milk. The print on the page. The lines of the letters. And also the milk which makes it possible, the white of the paper which is also writing.<sup>171</sup> Writing has colour. Colour has writing. Colour is a part of writing and apart from it. 'Todesfuge' was initially to be a tango of death, a dance. The dance is like colour. The dancer is like writing. How do we separate the dancer from the dance? How do we separate the colour from the writing, from that which it colours?

### The Shades: Part Two

Colour is untouchable. It is perceived as surface, as a coating of the world, but there is no beneath to colour. Smash a brick and colour remains within and across the fragments. Break a word. Bl a ck. The letters keep their colouring. Colour surrounds and is nowhere. It is upon and within things. It is upon the within of things. It is within the upon of things. It is everywhere and nowhere, it is everything and nothing. It is always and all, yet I cannot say that I am *touching* colour. I touch the object, I feel its texture. An object that has and does not have colour. I *see* colour without thinking it. Words do not possess colour. Colour is not the ink, nor the surface upon which the ink is inscribed. It is both and neither. Colour is not possessed by things. If possession is destruction, then colour is that which cannot be destroyed. Colour is not *of* language although all language has colour. Colour is the flesh of writing and it is its skin. Jean-Luc Nancy explains that the origin of the word 'chromatic,' of '*chrôma vient de chrôs, surface de corps, peau,*

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<sup>170</sup> Celan, *Collected Prose*, p.47.

<sup>171</sup> Scholem writes of Kabbalists who believed that the white spaces on the scroll of the Torah also consisted of letters, but ones that had not yet revealed themselves. Scholem, *On the Kaballah*, p.82. Even now, we can say that once we recognise that there is a white page we have *begun* to read that whiteness.



*chair*'.<sup>172</sup> Colour holds the corpus together but cannot be held by it. In writing *schwarze milch* Celan writes what writing cannot take away. He writes its colour. He writes nothing. Colour is 'already-no-more' yet 'still-here'. It is always already absent from writing yet also the very stuff of writing. Levi suggested that Celan's message gets lost in the 'background noise'. This '*background noise...is the ground of the world, the backdrop of the universe, the background of being, maybe*'.<sup>173</sup> The background noise is the horror. National Socialism was '*characterised by widespread useless violence, as an end in itself, with the sole purpose of creating pain, occasionally having a purpose, yet always redundant, always disproportionate to the purpose itself*'.<sup>174</sup> Purpose gives shape to an act. The act that exceeds purpose loses shape, it spills. The infliction of pain destroys the contours of the self. Pain kills. It returns the one in pain to the noise. The camps were the epicentre of pain, of the horror. '*Under the word and language, this wave, and beneath the wave, the black noise*'.<sup>175</sup> Celan must write *in* pain, not *of* it, he must carry it in the cadence of his words. And in their colour. He must write the horror. In the last chapter I described Céline's writing as a form of catharsis for the writer, a writing away of the horror. The violence is carried into language rather than carried out. Celan's writing however is from the horror. It is writing from out of the after-effects of fascism. His poetry the desolate words of a survivor. William Haver described the *hibakusha* (the survivors of atomic bombing) as being in a disjunct simultaneity, '*in an essential abjection...neither alive nor dead, neither present nor absent, neither inside nor outside the human, but the surplus of every binary*'.<sup>176</sup> The survivors of the Holocaust live as a similar surplus. An outside to the binary-relation. On the edge of noise. Of nothing. From the very beginning Celan writes across this terrain.

The *schwarze milch* is between the black and the white. It is the grey. Grey is ash-coloured, lead-coloured.<sup>177</sup> 'Todesfuge' is a grey area, a grey zone, an uncertain place. Grey is difficult to place, to keep in place, to hold. It is a colour between colours, a shade.

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<sup>172</sup> 'Chroma comes from *chros*, meaning the surface of the body, the skin, flesh'. Jean-Luc Nancy, *Technique du présent: essai sur On Kawara*, (Villeurbanne: Gachet, 1997), p.26. For a further discussion of the etymology of the word, see Conner, *The Book of Skin*, p.151.

<sup>173</sup> Serres, *Genesis*, p.62.

<sup>174</sup> Primo Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, Trans. Raymond Rosenthal, (London: Abacus, 1989), p.83.

<sup>175</sup> Serres, *Genesis*, p.139.

<sup>176</sup> William Haver, *The Body of this Death: Historicity and Sociality in the Time of AIDS*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), p.86.



The impossible black and white both shade to grey. All Celan's writings are penned in the ink of the *schwarze milch*. He writes with(in) the 'in-between, the ambiguous, the composite'.<sup>178</sup> His is an abject poetry. A poetry that reaches its abjection from a different direction than Céline. Céline writes from a language that privileges the symbolic towards a privileging of the semiotic. Celan writes from within a semiotic universe, a universe that occasionally *shows* itself in the symbolic. Céline shades his writing into grey and Celan shades his out of it. The grey is the collapsing inwards of distinctions, the losing of shape. It is a noisy colour. In a fragment of writing from 1914 or 1915 Walter Benjamin states that '*la couleur est de ce fait originelle pour elle-même, c'est-à-dire qu'elle ne se rapporte pas à des choses, ni non plus à leur apoparition dans les taches colorées; elle se rapporte au contraire à la plus haute concentration de voir*'.<sup>179</sup> Colour is not possessed by things, nor does colour represent things. Colour *is*. Benjamin adds: '*La travail consiste à montrer que la couleur et la forme sont distinctes*'.<sup>180</sup> Celan writes into colour to move beyond representation.<sup>181</sup> The words are and are not this colour, the *schwarze milch*, the black milk, is ink upon paper, the contrast that requires difference and shape, the darkness emerging from the light that is writing upon a page. Colour is also, however, within this contrast, undoing it. The black milk is the impossible non-edge of the black and the white, the grey beneath the black and the white that brings them together and undermines them. Celan writes towards the edges of his words, edges that always recede, that shade off. He writes in the shade of the ink towards the outside of writing, towards nothing. In his reply to a questionnaire sent out in 1958 by the Flinker bookstore in Paris, Celan suggested that because of the legacy of the horrors of war German poetry now distrusted 'beauty'. In the reply he describes German as having become 'a "greyer" language, a language which wants to locate even its "musicality" in such a way that it

<sup>177</sup> *The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*, Ed. C.T. Onions, (London: Book Club Associates, 1983), p.889.

<sup>178</sup> Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, p.4.

<sup>179</sup> 'Colour, for this reason, existed originally in itself, by which I mean that it was not related to things, nor to their appearance as coloured marks; colour is linked to the most intense seeing' (translation mine). 'La réflexion dans l'art et dans la couleur,' in Walter Benjamin, *Fragments*, Trans. Christophe Jouanlanne et Jean-François Poirier, (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2001), p.135. For an insightful reading of Benjamin's work on colour see Howard Caygill, *Walter Benjamin: The Colour of Experience*, (London: Routledge, 1998), especially pp.10-13 and pp.82-89.

<sup>180</sup> 'The work that is required is to demonstrate that colour and form are distinct' (translation mine). Ibid.

<sup>181</sup> This is not to say that colour does not act metonymically at times in his verse. See for example, Peter Szondi's discussion of Celan's use of the word 'red' in the poem 'Eden,' in *Celan Studies*, Trans. Susan Bernofsky and Harvey Mendelsohn, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), p.92.



*has nothing in common with the “euphony” which more or less blithely continued to sound alongside the greatest horrors’.*<sup>182</sup> Celan does not seek out pleasant sounds but instead opens his readers to the horrors of the noise. His is the greyest of languages.

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<sup>182</sup> Celan, *Collected Prose*, pp.15-16.

## Chapter Three

### Under the Skin

*At the first blow...this trust in the world breaks down. The other person, 'opposite' whom I exist physically in the world and with whom I can exist only as long as he does not touch my skin surface as border, forces his own corporeality on me with the first blow. He is on me and thereby destroys me. It is like a rape, a sexual act without the consent of one of the two partners.*<sup>1</sup>

#### 31661

31661...a sequence of figures...five numbers...a single number...a place assigned in a series...31658, 31659, 31660, 31661, 31662, 31663...a position in time...31661. 31661 is an indelible number, it is a tattoo. A tattoo is a design upon the skin. In tattooing the cuticle is punctured with a needle and then impregnated with pigment, marked with figures. It is a kind of writing that introduces an unfamiliar intimacy within the body. The tattoo breaks the border between inside and outside, beneath the skin yet upon the skin, ambiguous, in-between, a part of one yet apart from one. 31661 was a violent inking, a rendering nameless and a naming. *'You no longer have a name; this is your new name'*.<sup>2</sup> The number pinpoints a moment of arrival and indicates a period of survival. Those who were sent straight to the gas chambers were unmarked. The number is political. In his book on skin Steven Conner writes about 'the power that accrues to the mark' in actions like penal branding.<sup>3</sup> Here the mark is power, the crude hypostatization of a bureaucratic process. Power is most manifest in times of crisis and periods of certitude. The number is a sign of surety. A post-mark. A number that we see and that someone felt...31661...probably not the first blow but perhaps the most enduring. The blow manifestly differs from the touch. We are always already touched.

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<sup>1</sup> Jean Améry, *At the Mind's Limits*, Trans. Sidney Rosenfeld & Stella P. Rosenfeld, (London: Granta Books, 1999), p.28.

<sup>2</sup> Primo Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, Trans. Raymond Rosenthal, (London: Abacus, 1989), p.95. See also Elie Wiesel, *Night*, Trans. Stella Rodway, (London: Penguin, 1981), p.54. : *'The three "veterans," with needles in their hands, engraved a number on our left arms. I became A-7713. After that I had no other name'*.

<sup>3</sup> Steven Conner, *The Book of Skin*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004), p.74.



Our body bears the imprint of others from its beginning, the pressure of another starts the self.<sup>4</sup> We are shaped before we become. The mother – as fact or figure – creates our contours for us through a continuous process of cleaning and cradling. She draws us out, acts as our cartographer. We originate in her compass, touched to become. Kristeva describes this process of primal mapping in *Powers of Horror*:

*Through frustrations and prohibitions, this authority shapes the body into a territory having areas, orifices, points and lines, surfaces and hollows, where the archaic power of mastery and neglect, of the differentiation of proper-clean and improper-dirty, possible and impossible, is impressed and exerted.*<sup>5</sup>

The mother gifts us our borders through her allowances and interdictions. Yet we are also delineated in another way prior to this delineation or in conjunction with it. Our path is prepared before us. In advance of the body that becomes me there is signification. *‘This signification produces as an effect of its own procedure the very body that it nevertheless and simultaneously claims to discover as that which precedes its own action.’*<sup>6</sup> The body is an effect of signification rather than effecting signification. This means that language is productive rather than mimetic. As Judith Butler writes, it is also, by extension, *‘performative, inasmuch as this signifying act delimits and contours the body that it then claims to find prior to any and all significations’.*<sup>7</sup>

Kristeva’s understanding of signification differs considerably from Butler’s in that for her language is always composed of both a semiotic and a symbolic aspect. Butler is indeed critical of Kristeva’s semiotic, identifying it as a *‘prediscursive libidinal economy which occasionally makes itself known in language, but which maintains an ontological status prior to language itself’*.<sup>8</sup> This would seem to contradict Kristeva’s own understanding of the semiotic *chora*. The *chora* is articulated by the drives as they are arranged by the various constraints imposed upon the body. The theory of language Kristeva advances in *Revolution in Poetic Language* is more nuanced than Butler’s reading implies. Drucilla Cornell recognizes this when she writes that *‘it would be*

<sup>4</sup> Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*, (London: Verso, 2004), p.26.

<sup>5</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, Trans. Leon S. Roudiez, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), p.72.

<sup>6</sup> Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex”*, (London: Routledge, 1993), p.30.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

*incorrect to argue that Kristeva's account of the maternal is either simplistically naturalistic or ontological, because the signifiante of the maternal is given within the gender structures of the Lacanian framework, and not by the very "being" of woman'.<sup>9</sup> Psychic structures should not be conflated with physical bodies.<sup>10</sup> Kristeva also makes the cultural nature of the semiotic explicit in *Revolution in Poetic Language*, stating that the semiotic is 'put in place by a biological set up and is always already social and therefore historical'.<sup>11</sup> Through the guidance of the mother the drives come together, become discursive, socially conditioned. The drive is usually conceived of as hereditary, inherited pressures within the body that require satisfaction. The baby begins wholly impulsive. Yet this beginning is always within culture. The womb is not acultural. The pulse of the mother is culturally contingent. The stresses of the everyday - the changing cadences of the heartbeat, the different soundings of breathing - are measured and reflected by the mother's body. The social lives through the unborn child. There is however the matter of the child, the bones, the flesh and blood, the excitations and energies, the substances and surfaces that are played upon by the world outside as it composes the baby. The heart beats the rhythm of its age, an age that does not make the heartbeat but borrows it. This matter of the child is kneaded for the world outside to become inside. For me, this matter is what Kristeva means by the biological.*

In this sense Kristeva's understanding of language is more similar to Butler's than one might initially be led to believe. Butler concedes in *Bodies that Matter* that the 'materiality of language, indeed, of the very sign that attempts to denote "materiality," suggests that it is not the case that everything, including materiality, is always already language'.<sup>12</sup> Language is material. The material though 'never fully escapes from the process by which it is signified'.<sup>13</sup> Kristeva's conception of the semiotic might be read as

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<sup>8</sup> Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, (London: Routledge, 1990), p.80.

<sup>9</sup> Drucilla Cornell, *Beyond Accommodation: Ethical Feminism, Deconstruction, and the Law*, (London: Routledge, 1991), p.49.

<sup>10</sup> Although Kristeva herself does at times seem to do precisely this, such as in *Stabat Mater*. See Julia Kristeva, 'Stabat Mater' in *Tales of Love*, Trans. Leon S. Roudiez, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987), pp.234-263.

<sup>11</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, Trans. Leon S. Roudiez, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), p.68.

<sup>12</sup> Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter*, p.68.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.



a reversal of this award of custody, signification 'never fully escapes from the matter through which it signifies'. The drives are a constant reminder of the materiality of language; they provided the ink for primary inscriptions.

Primary inscriptions occur before the articulation of the *chora*. The drives are described by Kristeva as '*energy charges as well as psychical marks*'.<sup>14</sup> The mark must be made before it can come to articulate. Energy has to be produced. The way the drives themselves emerge is not explained in *Revolution in Poetic Language*. The drives arise through the process I call primary inscription here. Primary inscriptions simultaneously produce the paper and ink – the skin and drives – out of which they are written. The inscription writes the surface upon which it will appear; the surface writes the inscription that will mark it. This invites the question as to what it is that is before or beneath this surface. The before is what I called 'noise' in my previous chapter. It is aimless and nameless. It is not. It is the potential of nothingness or the nothingness that is potential. The drive is not until it is guided to where it is supposed to arrive. Drives become in their congregation. They are gathered by the mother as she zones the body of the child. The mother pressures areas of sensation into becoming, the drives find themselves here. An area of sensation is distinguished in relation to an area without sensation; it acts as what could be named a double-naming. Sensation - the concentration of excitation - produces both itself and a surrounding absence through its emergence. The surrounding absence should not be confused with nothing. Nothing has no relation to anything, has no relation. Sensations - which are aboriginal namings – start out as temporary. The first names are presence and absence, not known as such, but felt. The first names around the orifices of the body are sensational and fleeting. These are names that are immediately forgotten, names that are not accorded the permanence of remembrance. The mother acts as a magnet attracting the drives to areas of the body through her touch, giving them a place to aim towards, somewhere to arrive and actualize themselves.<sup>15</sup> For example, as the child suckles, the breast focuses the drives around what will be the mouth; this orifice

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<sup>14</sup> Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, p.25.

<sup>15</sup> Touch here is of course not to be understood as something that is recognized as such by the child. The child has not separated from the mother yet. At this stage the child is therefore touched all the time and hence untouched and untouchable. The conjoined must separate for touch to take place.

briefly becomes an area of sensation. When the breast is withdrawn the area of sensation evanesces into the nothingness.

The first thought of the child will be one of loss as the constant appearance and disappearance of sensation (and with it, its absence) enters into memory. Memory is an experience that the mind will not permit to return to the nothingness. Memory precedes thinking. The first thought is modeled on this memory, the experience of presence and absence which is any sensation. This experience is translated into loss. This translation, the first thought, is a response to the absence of touch, the absence of the breast. When the child ceases to be enbodied the thought arises that something is missing and is being missed. This thought replaces the lost touch. As Wilfred R. Bion realized this thought serves to keep the infant company.<sup>16</sup> Words also later act to fill the emptiness that is the mouth bereft of the breast.

Words which are part of thought – and the usual cite of the performative – emerge later, out of the mother's work of mapping. The mother sensualizes the child through touch and sound. This sensory world is what Didier Anzieu terms the echotactile backcloth to communication.<sup>17</sup> This backcloth provides the means by which communication at a distance becomes possible. Voiced sound as a source of comforting – the cooing of a mother for instance – is condensed into (and superseded by) words. The language of touch – of presence and absence – is supplemented by one of gesture. Anzieu describes this supersession in terms of an *Aufhebung*. It is a somatic dialectic within which the initial maternal caresses and murmurs are 'at once denied, surpassed and preserved'.<sup>18</sup> Inarticulate sounds and frequent touching appear to be transcended by talking. Speech, however, is never entirely able to suppress its tactility, nor this early voicing that continues to carry.

The 'Skin Ego' as it is elaborated by Didier Anzieu should be understood as the resultant relief of the mother's mapping. It is a representation of the interplay between bodies, a means of making sense of those early interactions. The mother in caring for the

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<sup>16</sup> Didier Anzieu, *The Skin Ego*, Trans. Chris Turner, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), pp. 37-38. Bion develops these ideas in his essay 'A Theory of Thinking.' I came across this essay too late to integrate the arguments developed there into this thesis. See W.R. Bion, *Second Thoughts*, (London: Karnac, 1984), pp.110-119.

<sup>17</sup> Anzieu, *The Skin Ego*, p.153.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.



child must sacrifice proximity for the overview necessary to provide for the varying needs of the infant. Different needs are satisfied at different times causing shifts in the attention given to parts of the child's body, nourishing variations. The gestures of the mother tending to the baby – the maternal environment - form the matter out of which the fragile integument that is the Skin Ego emerges. Once the Skin Ego has been sketched out, it holds the nascent psyche together, shielding it, fulfilling a function of '*maintaining the psyche*'.<sup>19</sup> The parchment of primal writing, it is emblazoned with '*an original pre-verbal writing made up of traces upon the skin*'.<sup>20</sup> This is not primary inscription, which produces only a fleeting skin. This is skin that has concretized through the repetition of primary inscription; it is the secondary permanent skin that has superseded its transient precursor. The pre-verbal writing Anzieu writes of is actually secondary inscription. The Skin Ego figures this secondary inscription which was written by the mother upon the skin that supports it.

The skin has three functions which are central to Anzieu's elaboration of the Skin Ego:

*The primary function of the skin is as the sac which contains and retains inside it the goodness and fullness accumulating there through feeding, care, the bathing in words. Its second function is as the interface which marks the boundary with the outside and keeps that outside out; it is the barrier which protects against penetration by the aggression and greed emanating from others, whether people or objects. Finally, the third function – which the skin shares with the mouth and which it performs at least as often – is as a site and a primary means of communicating with others, of establishing signifying relations; it is moreover, an 'inscribing surface' for the marks left by those others.*<sup>21</sup>

It is a container, it keeps things in. It is a border, it separates inside/outside. It is a kind of paper. These three functions are all interrelated. The container is also a border, as is paper. The container contains something and prevents it from escaping to an elsewhere, an outside. Paper that is written upon carries the memory of the moment when it was a border between two pressures, the pen and what the paper rested upon. A paper without

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p.98.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p.105.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., p.40.

support could not be written upon.<sup>22</sup> It would move with the pen rather than meeting it. The skin as an inscribing surface must have an inside (the flesh) as well as an outside. The skin however is punctured by orifices that undo any simple notion of an inside and an outside, these are loci of undecidability. The skin folds beneath itself, beneath the outside of the body that it is supposed to be: the anus, the ears, the lips, the nostrils, neither inside nor outside, thresholds that unsettle the image of the skin as border. In places the skin trespasses the border that it is meant to be. Whilst he does acknowledge that the skin is paradoxical, Anzieu does not explain how the presence of uncertain holes - such as the mouth and the posterior opening - (with)in the skin fail to trouble the Skin Ego.<sup>23</sup> He details how knowledge of the imperfect formation of the Skin Ego can have implications for the study and treatment of masochism and narcissism, but does not explain how the Skin Ego is ever formed such that it appears whole. Given the undecidable areas of the skin that form part of the template upon which it rests, the Skin Ego must always be holed, there must always be a danger of psychic seepage. The Skin Ego which has partially failed in its containing function is in fact described by Anzieu as a colander. Such an Ego, with its continuity '*broken into by holes,*' is one in which '*thoughts, and memories are only with difficulty retained, they leak away*'.<sup>24</sup> For Anzieu however, this is an abnormal Skin Ego.

Given the presence of holes within the skin out of which the Skin Ego arises, why is every Skin Ego not a colander? The psychic process of abjection may provide the answer to this question. The abject, as Kristeva explains in an often quoted passage, is that which does not '*respect borders, positions, rules*'.<sup>25</sup> The skin, as a border with disrespects itself, would seem to have an abject aspect. As I referred to in the previous chapter, the skin on the surface of milk is cited by Kristeva as an example of food loathing. When '*the eyes see or the lips touch*' this skin, a '*gagging sensation*' is

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<sup>22</sup> Water as liquid is such a paper. The story of the Persian king Xerxes seeking to punish the Hellespont - for destroying a bridge he had recently constructed - by having it tattooed, rests upon this knowledge for its effect. For a brief summation of Herodotus's account of this event see pp. 6-7 of C.P. Jones's 'Stigma and Tattoo' in *Written on the Body*, Ed. Jane Caplan, (London: Reaktion Books, 2000), pp.1-16.

<sup>23</sup> Anzieu lists several paradoxes, amongst them that the skin is '*both permeable and impermeable, superficial and profound, truthful and misleading*'. See *The Skin Ego*, p.17.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., p.102.

<sup>25</sup> Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, p.4.



experienced.<sup>26</sup> Is this nausea solely because of the skin of the milk, or is it also because that skin reminds the I that the rims and lids of the eyes, and the lips, as skin are liminal (in-between outside and inside)? Waste and dung - mucus, piss, shit, spit – are also abject and function as metonyms for orifices that hole the skin. The corpse, the *'utmost of abjection,'* shows death as a *'wound with blood and pus, or the sickly acrid smell of sweat, of decay'*.<sup>27</sup> The corpse as it is described here is a skin losing its integrity. The body is seeping out through the skin as sweat or viscid matter. Abjection - the throwing up and out of filth and refuse – is therefore, at least partially, the expulsion of things connected to the skin's holes. The bodily functions that expel (shitting and vomiting, for example) provide the model for the psychic process which finds these same processes repugnant. At the same time that the Skin Ego surrounds the psyche, abjection as a psychic process also emerges to support that which contains it. An imperfect Skin Ego might therefore be partly attributable to a breakdown in the process of abjection.

The tattooing of 31661 was an abject act for many reasons, one reason of which is shared by all tattoos. The tattoo crosses (out) borders. The tattooist's needle breaks into the skin, suffusing the skin with pigment. The prick of the needle – like the cut or the blow – can act to reassert the self. If you are hit you are recognized as being there to be hit, the hit provides an unwelcome and painful, but tangible, reassertion of self. The feel of the needle similarly suggests an act of recognition; 'you' are here being tattooed. Unlike a bruise or a graze however the tattoo does not physically disappear over time, it remains. Although gradually fading, the tattoo never entirely vanishes.<sup>28</sup> The tattoo therefore - whilst it may continue to remind the person tattooed that they were once recognized as tattooable – represents a permanent challenge to corporeal integrity. The tattoo is after all an undecidable:

*The tattoo substitutes a surface for the actual surface of the skin: but it does so in a way that plays with the knowledge that the skin has been penetrated, since the technique of tattooing in fact requires pigment to be injected beneath the surface of the skin. Thus what appears to lie on top of the skin in fact lies below it.*<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid. pp.2-3.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid. pp.3-4.

<sup>28</sup> Incidentally, even the use of laser treatment to remove tattoos is often only partially successful. The tattoo sometimes remains beneath the surface of the now superficially clean skin.

<sup>29</sup> Connor, *The Book of Skin*, p. 63.

The tattoo is above and below the skin...in the skin and on the skin...31661 is abyssal. The numerals are holes within the skin. To look at the tattoo is to look through the body. The tattoo is writing within the skin and as such seems like a scar but a scar is not foreign to the body. A scar may be a response to an action which has impacted upon the body from the outside, but it arises from within the body. A scar may be ugly but it is not untouchable. The scar gestures towards the abject; it shows the skin as border to be permeable. It does not disrespect the skin however, rather it affirms it. A scar is the writing of a wound. It is a form of narration. It tells a story of the body, for the body, through the body. The hardened skin tissue of the scar can then later be translated into more traditional narrative structures. A good example of this kind of translation is provided in a scene that forms part of the film *Jaws* (Steven Spielberg, 1975). Three men, Brody, Hooper and Quint, have set out on a boat to hunt down and kill the great white shark that has been carrying out attacking along the local shoreline. One night, whilst sitting around the cabin table, Hooper and Quint set about comparing their scars and relating what caused them, a moray eel, a bull shark, a thresher shark etc... Eventually Brody intervenes and points to a scar on the arm of Quint asking for an explanation. It proves to be a tattoo of the U.S.S. Missouri which the sailor has had removed. The U.S.S. Missouri was a ship torpedoed by a Japanese submarine in the final days of the war; because no rescue was immediately forthcoming, many sailors were subsequently killed by sharks whilst waiting to be picked up. Although Quint has endeavoured to have the visible reminder of his past removed, a trace remains (and, of course, the memory also remains tattooed in his mind, the flesh may forget but the mind does not).

Scars are sculpture; a deep cut memorialized in tissue. The scar may cause revulsion; it reminds us of the wound that it was, but it can also arouse affection, be touched and touching:

*...when the top of her dress was around her hips and he saw the sculpture her back had become, like the decorative work of an ironsmith too passionate for display, he could think but not say, "Aw, Lord, girl." And he would tolerate no peace until he had touched every ridge and leaf of it with his mouth, none of which Sethe could feel because her back skin had been dead for years.<sup>30</sup>*

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<sup>30</sup> Toni Morrison, *Beloved*, (London: Vintage, 1997), pp.17-18.



Touching the scar, kissing it (even if that kiss is not felt and as such is not, is only known, only kisses the mind), is denying or overcoming the abject. I should loathe you but I do not, I love you. There are many examples of this love over loathing portrayed in contemporary film and literature.<sup>31</sup> The physical contact of two people through the connective tissue of the scar seems an attempt by the one without scarring to share the wound.<sup>32</sup> The texture of this trace of injury acts as Braille for another's body, for another's lips. Lips that read the embossed body and learn its past, the skin provides a chronicle of experience. But also lips that hide the history of a hole - conceal the cicatrix, the trace of a wound - and conceal themselves. This kind of kiss (like the French kiss) is the (con)sealing of two holes. The buss comforts because it brings memories of the maternal envelope, of the body cradled and protected, of secure borders. I have never read of someone kissing an Auschwitz tattoo although such kissing must occur (if not deliberately, then by chance, during the embrace of by now aging lovers) and have occurred. Any such kiss would however miss the tattoo. The lips would only kiss the surface of the skin, not the marks that lie beneath. The tattoo is untouchable. It cannot be shared. It is too deep.

31661 is a permanent reminder of a moment - a visual record of an event that was also acoustic and tactile - that is inaccessible. Tattooed numbers...numbers in a row (sometimes prefixed by a letter, here not) within an arm or a chest...are in part metonyms. A metonym is a name change. With the tattoo a name becomes a number. The number is the name that replaces. Now the number names other names, 31661 names Auschwitz and Ravensbrück. The number belongs to the numbered (although it was designed to dispossess) and accrues a history. There are sometimes efforts to recount this

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<sup>31</sup> Two examples that immediately occur to me are the scene in the film *Thirteen* (2003) when Melanie (played by the actress Holly Hunter) kisses the scars left by her daughter Tracy's (played by Evan Rachel Wood) self-mutilation, and the instant in Barbara Bell's autobiography when a woman with AIDS whom she is 'buddying' called Ann-Marie kisses the scarring that marks Bell's recent mastectomy. '*I told her about my mastectomy and how I'd felt so bad about myself. She said, "I want to see it." I'd never shown anybody. I said, "Oh, it's just a pucker of a scar. You don't want to see anything as ugly as that." She said, "I want to see it," in her very quiet, determined voice - she never spoke loud. So she saw it and she just bent down and started kissing it, saying how beautiful it was, to make me feel better about it. She was such a wise little creature and so courageous*'. Barbara Bell, *Just Take Your Frock Off: A Lesbian Life*, (Brighton: Ourstory Books, 1999), p.161.

<sup>32</sup> For a discussion of this within the context of Morrison's *Beloved* see Laurie Vickroy, *Trauma and Survival in Contemporary Fiction*, (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2002), pp. 182-183.

history, to cut through the skin and allow the memories to bleed out. The writings of 31661 are an example of such an attempt.

## Writing Skin

31661 survived the camps. 31661 unnumbered herself...renamed herself Charlotte Delbo...but the number remained in her skin.<sup>33</sup> The tattoo, a moment of communication; spoken and bodied. *'Dipping her stiletto into a little bottle, a Jewish woman tattooed me, saying: "Don't be afraid. It doesn't hurt," and in a scarcely audible voice: "Where did you come from? Paris? Will the war be over soon?" - "Yes, we won Stalingrad."'*<sup>34</sup> The Jewish woman is nameless, a nameless voice that greets the convoy, those about to be unnamed. In *Convoy to Auschwitz* she persists in her whispered resistance, barely audible. She spoke louder in Delbo's skin, where possibly the only extant writing in her own hand remained. A fragile remembrance, now long since gone.

Delbo explicitly links skin and memory in the opening pages of her final book *La mémoire et les jours*. The skin is memory. It registers the blows that impact upon it from the outside and the motions of the body beneath it. Delbo wore her skin out at Auschwitz:

*Explaining the inexplicable. There comes to mind the image of a snake shedding its old skin, emerging from beneath it in a fresh, glistening one. I left a worn-out skin behind at Auschwitz – it smelt bad, that skin – branded by all the blows it had received, and rediscovered myself wearing another, beautiful and clean, although with me the molting was not as fast as that of the snake's. The visible traces came away with the old skin: the fixed stare of sunken eyes, the tottering gait, the frightened gestures. With the new skin the gestures belonging to a former life returned: the using of a toothbrush, of toilet paper, of a handkerchief, of a knife and fork, eating calmly, saying hello to people when entering a room, closing the door, standing up straight, speaking, later on smiling with my lips and, still later, smiling with my lips and my eyes at the same time. Rediscovering odors, flavors, the smell of rain. In Birkenau, rain brought out the smell of diarrhea. It is the foulest smell I know. In Birkenau, the rain beat down upon the camp, upon us, carrying soot from the crematoriums, and the smell of burning flesh. We were steeped in it.*

*It took a few years for the new skin to fully form, to consolidate.*

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<sup>33</sup> Charlotte Delbo was a French political prisoner. She was arrested in France in March 1942 and sent to Auschwitz in January 1943. In January 1944 she was transferred to Ravensbrück.

<sup>34</sup> Charlotte Delbo, *Convoy to Auschwitz*, Trans. Carol Cosman, Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1997, p. 6.



*Rid of its old skin, the snake is unchanged. It appears that I am as well.  
Nonetheless...*<sup>35</sup>

The skin is between two camps; the concentration camp and its aftermath. It is also between the effect of the camp upon the exterior of the body and upon its interior. The skin recalls motions. When our bodies move our skin moves. The skin creases and smoothes as the muscles flex. There was a particular economy of gesture at Auschwitz. The skin displays the gestures that the body has learned. We are taught the appropriate movements. The way muscles operate is partly governed by the impact of social technologies. The use of the knife and fork – using the muscles in the arms and hands – is an everyday occurrence. It is also the end-product of a particular education. Muscles are ideological, indeed Althusser's examples of interpellation are as much gestural as they are acoustic and/or visual events. In the moment of hailing a posture is assumed. This is something John Mowitt recognizes during his discussion of interpellation in *percussion*. Mowitt writes that in the moment of recognition that one is being hailed, the '*ears prick up, the head cranes, the body turns*'.<sup>36</sup> He does not develop his thinking about this gestural dimension to interpellation any further as he is more interested in the acoustic aspect. For him '*interpellation is clearly a conspicuously sonoric event*'.<sup>37</sup> It is also evidently a muscular one. The '*one-hundred-and-eighty-degree physical conversion*' that occurs in Althusser's first example of interpellation requires a motional response.<sup>38</sup> You need muscles to become you. The subject is not free from subjection beneath the skin.<sup>39</sup> Delbo in describing her movements in Auschwitz - the unsteady walk and the anxious demeanour – is also describing a politics of deprivation and cruelty, one that has impacted upon and within the body. This impact is made visible through the skin. The

<sup>35</sup> Charlotte Delbo, *Days and Memory*, Trans. Rosette Lamont, (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2001), p.1. (translation emended).

<sup>36</sup> John Mowitt, *percussion*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), p. 48.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., p. 45.

<sup>38</sup> Louis Althusser, 'Ideology and the Ideological State Apparatuses,' in Louis Althusser, *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, Trans. Ben Brewster, (London: NLB, 1971), p.163.

<sup>39</sup> An example of this is provided by the research of Iris Marion Young, in an essay she describes how women athletes suffer from an arrested potential as a result of their education. In a footnote she details the results of a survey of textbooks for young children which '*revealed that children are thirteen times more likely to see a vigorously active man than a vigorously active woman and three times more likely to see a relatively active man than a relatively active woman*'. See 'Throwing Like a Girl: A Phenomenology of Feminine Body Comportment, Motility, and Spatiality' in Iris Marion Young, *Throwing like a Girl and*

wavering walker is a walking skin. We only usually see the skin of someone. The totter Delbo describes is the result of tiredness or starvation, yet we do not see the exhausted muscles or the empty stomach except as they are mediated through the skin. The skin writes its inside. It is the *skin* which sways or, when threatened, cowers. These movements are only visible on the surface of body, even if motivated from within it. This is not to say that we are only skin deep, but that we are only ever seen to be so. The pen that I write with or the keyboard that I type upon (examples of co-operation and dictation, respectively) touch my skin rather than my muscles or my mind. The skin mediates gesture. We encounter the world through the death that gives us shape. *'Skin is both dead and alive. The thin outer layer, the epidermis, consists of strata of cells that migrate towards the surface, where they compact into a layer of dead material'*.<sup>40</sup>

### In the Muscle

Delbo writes that the totalitarian gestures which she experienced were gradually forgotten, replaced by the old ways of moving from before her internment. This was a forgetting which would be made visible by the skin. The skin handles the hanky, the toothbrush and the toilet paper. The muscles that grasp do so through the skin. The new beginning is only visibly skin-deep. That there is flesh beneath the skin usually requires a leap of faith. The x-ray only shows that inside we are shadow-lands. The autopsy, the bloody wound, the open-mouth, are all exceptional windows within. Yet perhaps gestures are never forgotten, merely foregone. In his book *Parables of the Virtual*, Brian Massumi discusses the different modes of perception that exist in the body. These include tactile sensibility (which is 'exteroceptive'), visceral sensibility (which is 'interoceptive'), and the sensibility of muscles and ligaments, which is proprioception.<sup>41</sup> Proprioception is a folding of touch into the body, *'enveloping the skin's contact with the external world in a dimension of medium depth: between epidermis and viscera'*.<sup>42</sup> It translates encounters

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*Other Essays in Feminist Philosophy and Social Theory*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), p. 158.

<sup>40</sup> Ellen Lupton, 'Skin: New Design Organics,' in Ellen Lupton, *Skin*, (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2002), p.31. The child in the film *The Sixth Sense* who says 'I see dead people!' is therefore simply relating a normal occurrence. We are all dead on the outside.

<sup>41</sup> Brian Massumi, *Parables of the Virtual*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), p. 58.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.



with objects into ‘*a muscular memory of relationality*’.<sup>43</sup> Muscle is a ‘tissue of quotations’ formed from encounters with the external world. If Améry flinched at the first blow, this flinch as painful motion is not forgotten by the muscles that enabled it. Similarly the muscle that is part of a situation in which it should move but cannot, remembers that inaction. Muscle remembers when it was not, hence, as I will explain, when it was:

*You who are passing by  
Well dressed in all your muscles  
How can we forgive you  
That are all dead*<sup>44</sup>

This quotation forms part of Delbo’s poem ‘Prayer to the Living to Forgive them for being Alive,’ the first two lines are repeated three times in the course of the poem. The speaker of the poem resents these bodies clothed in muscle precisely because these muscles are clothing. They are upon yet apart from those who pass by, not experienced as such and therefore extraneous if not non-existent. Usually muscle is the background to an everyday action – part of a process – such as carrying, kneeling, standing, sitting, walking or writing. It is familiar and therefore invisible; it is the ‘*excess of life which keeps you from feeling*’.<sup>45</sup> Muscle is a luxury that goes unnoticed. It is only in unusual exertion that muscle surfaces.<sup>46</sup> It is when muscles fail that they become:

*She was clinging to the other side of the slope, her hands and feet grasping the snow-covered embankment. Her whole body was taut, her jaws tight, her neck with its dislocated cartilage straining, as were her muscles – what was left of them on her bones.*

*Yet she strained in vain – the exertion of one pulling on an imaginary rope.*<sup>47</sup>

This effort to climb a snow-covered bank whilst in an extremely weakened condition is an effort unknown and unknowable in the everyday. To watch people passing by without

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid. p. 59.

<sup>44</sup> Charlotte Delbo, *Auschwitz and After*, Trans. Rosette C. Lamont, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), p. 229.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> This is an idea I develop further in my article ‘Towards a Radical Politics of Muscle,’ *Limina*, Vol.10, 2004, pp. 52-69. See particularly the section on Kathy Acker’s essay ‘Against Ordinary Language: The Language of the Body,’ pp. 62-65.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid. p. 24.

effort – to watch effortless motion – after seeing this, is to be reminded of the impossibility of communicating life in a particular body to another body. The level of atrophy that Delbo describes was an end that befell many in the camps. The most extreme examples of this wasting away of the body were to be encountered in the figures of the *Muselmanner*, human beings ‘in the process of dissolution’.<sup>48</sup> ‘In a final stage of emaciation, their skeletons were enveloped by flaccid, parchment like sheaths of skin, edema had formed on their feet and thighs, their posterior muscles had collapsed’.<sup>49</sup> They were in such a state of profound malnutrition, that ‘their limbs moved slowly, hesitantly, almost mechanically’.<sup>50</sup> The prisoners were deliberately weakened through poor and inadequate rations; a state of asthenia was encouraged. The resultant wreck of a body, the *Muselmann*, acted as the polar opposite to the Nazi ideal, the muscle man. Fascism ‘places the body at the center of its ideological aesthetics, fusing athleticism, hypermasculinity, and politics to fashion its sense of a perfect body’.<sup>51</sup> The perfect body is solid, in shape. It has firm contours. It is a physique similar to the one that so excited Louis-Ferdinand Céline, the central difference being that in National Socialism it is primarily the male body which is to be celebrated as a source of strength. The psychological underpinning is the same however, a need for circumscription. The ideal body is a bounded body. It is a body with well-defined limits, one which keeps the outside out and the inside in. The *Muselmann* is a body turned inside out. It is the anti-body. The body against which a healthy body can define itself, the constitutive outside. In the camps the skin of the inmates – the contour of their bodies – was placed under sustained attack.<sup>52</sup> The first break into the body was the tattoo. It became a permanent insult to bodily integrity. The body was then subjected to gradual degradation, grew scabrous, became marked by edemas, eruptions, effusions and lesions. As Filip Müller describes, in the case of the *Muselmanner*, often ‘their bones had rubbed through their

<sup>48</sup> Wolfgang Sofsky, *The Order of Terror: The Concentration Camp*, Trans. William Templer, (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1999), p.25.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid. p.199.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Alan M. Klein, *Little Big Men: Bodybuilding Subculture and Gender Construction*, (Albany: SUNY, 1993), p.255.

<sup>52</sup> ‘I idealize and maintain my ideology by attacking the surfaces of those who threaten its cohering content – in the case of the Third Reich, the Jew-Body’. James M. Glass, ‘Skin Ego and Purification Ritual: Psychodynamics behind the Nazi Final Solution,’ in *Journal for the Psychoanalysis of Culture and Society*, 2:1 (Spring 1997), pp.50-51.



*thin parchment-like skin, resulting in inflamed and festering wounds*'.<sup>53</sup> This assault on the skin was certain to have effects on the psyche, '*the psychotic fragmentation of the subject suggests a damaged skin as well as a mirror without silvering*'.<sup>54</sup> The psychotic is one who has a holed skin or an imperfect identification with the image in the mirror. The skin was continuously pierced and punctured in the camps. Their skin was made abject. In *Powers of Horror*, Kristeva discusses the chapters in Leviticus which link skin and impurity. These chapters '*locate impurity in leprosy: skin tumor, impairment of the cover that guarantees corporeal integrity, sore on the visible presentable surface*'.<sup>55</sup> Leprosy '*visibly affects the skin, the essential if not initial boundary of biological and psychic individuation*'.<sup>56</sup> Kristeva concedes that legislating against leprosy through purity laws would also make sense because of the detrimental effects it can have on a community. This admission is, however, an unnecessary one. As mentioned in the opening chapter, as Hyam Maccoby explains in his significant assessment of the purity laws, *Ritual and Morality*, the Greek word *lepra* used in the Septuagint should not be translated as leprosy (which in Greek is *elephas* or *elephantiasis*).<sup>57</sup> *Lepra* refers to skin diseases of various kinds – such as eczema and psoriasis – which are not usually contagious or life threatening. Maccoby's insight emphasizes the symbolic function of these laws. Anything which threatens the integrity of the skin places the self in jeopardy. This is one of the reasons why the inmates endured a crisis of subjectivity. Their borders became unstable, their shape uncertain. The consequent loss of a sense of identity is encapsulated in the closing lines of Elie Wiesel's *Night*. Several weeks after his liberation from Buchenwald, time spent in hospital recovering, he is finally able to summon the strength to look at himself in the mirror: '*From the depths of the mirror, a corpse gazed back at me. The look in his eyes, as they stared into mine, has never left me*'.<sup>58</sup> In the camps, the inmate – even when not reduced to the physical and mental state of the *Muselmann* – crosses over to the side of death, the side before and after all identity. The corpse is '*the most*

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<sup>53</sup> Filip Müller, *Eyewitness Auschwitz: Three Years in the Gas Chambers*, Trans. Susanne Flatauer, (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1999), p.45.

<sup>54</sup> Julia Kristeva, *The Sense and Non-Sense of Revolt: The Powers and Limits of Psychoanalysis*, Trans. Jeanine Herman, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), p.53.

<sup>55</sup> Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, p.101.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> Hyam Maccoby, *Ritual and Morality: The Ritual Purity System and its Place in Judaism*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp.118-119.

*sickening of wastes...a border that has encroached upon everything*'.<sup>59</sup> The inmate who has become a corpse no longer has a border. Death is the end to all shape. Delbo writes back from this death. Her writing might be read as a reshaping. The *Muselmänner* do not feature by name in her work but from the account she gives, the woman who strains on the imaginary rope is one step away from their state of torpor. What distinguishes her from the *Muselmänner* is that she has a sense of purpose. Delbo wants to communicate to bodies that are in shape what it is like to become misshapen. There is nothing in the everyday however which can act as an adequate point of comparison.

### Comparing Memories

In Freud's earliest conception of it, memory itself operates through comparison. As part of the 'Project for a Scientific Psychology' Freud advances a cellular explanation of mnemonics in which memory is a shuffling of cells. Nervous tissue changes with each contact it encounters. This is not memory in the sense we are used to. Memory is simply the enduring modification of tissue from one state to another. The tissue has '*a capacity for being permanently altered by single occurrences – which offers such a striking contrast to the behaviour of a material that permits the passage of a wave-movement and thereafter returns to its former condition*'.<sup>60</sup> Once cells are agitated they change their alignment, this variation in what Freud calls the 'impermeable neurones' becomes the registration of an event.<sup>61</sup> For variation to take place there must, however, be a constant. Not all the neurones can alter; some must remain as they are to act as the gauge, the internal witness. Yet where does this measure of all memories come from? Is there an initial set up of tissue, an originary form awaiting disruption and the advent of memory? We become in excitation, arising out of a chaos of stimuli. There is no cellular structure that can be said to be from the beginning. There are, however, ever increasing representations of the passage of excitations, which persist and accumulate. Each representation is unique. Memory is, therefore, not composed from excitation but is the

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<sup>58</sup> Wiesel, *Night*, p.126.

<sup>59</sup> Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, p.3.

<sup>60</sup> Sigmund Freud, 'Project for a Scientific Psychology,' in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud Volume 1*, Trans. James Strachey, (London: Vintage, 2001), p. 299.



figuration of its effects (effects which are the material for the figuration that represents them). What Freud has described here through the materiality of the body is memory as it operates in the mind in the everyday. It is memory as it exists within what Kristeva calls the symbolic. Memory in the symbolic disavows the excitations that are part of it. Freud is wrong in this early work to separate perception and memory entirely. Perception is sensation and memory (at least on one level) is figuration. Sensation lines all figuration. Sensation – as affect – is allied to the drives.<sup>62</sup> It is part of the semiotic underside to language (and to memory as an aspect of that language) within the symbolic. Memory is therefore sinewous, connecting thought and sensation, symbolic and semiotic. Pinch me and do I not think pain as much as feel it. Memory is thought and touch preserved. Memory as thought – the first *I remember* – is an instance of cognition (the recognition of loss) that adopts the infant in the mother's absence. The memory stands in for the sensation, is a surrogate. The warmth of the mother is replaced by the warmth of words. Memory is also a form of sensation however, in a way that the word as replacement is not. Memory goes deeper than words. Memory is not a representation, there is no separation, there is no back to a before. It is like an echo, a sound that returns less distinct but which is the same sound only dulled by an impact. Memory is a downward curve, a decline. It is bottomless. The end of the decline is the end of memory. There is never an occurrence and then a memory of it. There can be no opening between occurrence and remembrance...there can be no gap. Memory is fastened to the sensation that occasioned it. It *is* that sensation. Memory is dwindling sensation. Améry's first blow still resonates within him. It is not remembered. It is not called to mind, but continually calls. The blow is sometimes in the background and sometimes in the foreground but it is never not present. Experience – as memory – has no past. It is now. We do not have a memory if memory is conceived as the remembrance of things past. The past is beyond memory; it

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<sup>61</sup> Freud identifies two types of neurones, the permeable (which are associated with perception, and offer no resistance to excitation) and the impermeable (which form the stuff of memory, and resist excitation). In this schema memory and perception are distinct. Ibid. pp. 299-300.

<sup>62</sup> The drives express themselves as affect and idea. The idea is thought, a drive transformed into an image. The affect is a quota of excitation which can exist autonomously from the idea. Affect is drive manifesting itself as sensation rather than as representation. See André Green, *The Fabric of Affect in Psychoanalytic Discourse*, Trans. Alan Sheridan, (London: Routledge, 1999), pp.234-238.

is history. All experiences have no past. They are continuous, unbroken.<sup>63</sup> We are an increase of experiences. Some begin before others but none end, or if they do end they do so forever. What is forgotten can never be known. What is forgotten cannot trouble us, what troubles us is still present in some form. What we know we cannot call to mind is still *in mind*.

*Auschwitz et après*, the title of Delbo's famous trilogy, is translated as *Auschwitz and after* yet the words '*et après*' also carry the connotation 'what next', *Auschwitz and what next?* There is an after but there is no what next. What continues to happen is Auschwitz, although it does not happen all the time. The mind fences off the memory of Auschwitz. This is a process Delbo describes in *La mémoire et les jours*:

*The skin enfolding the memory of Auschwitz is tough. Even so it gives ways at times, restoring all it contains. The will has no power over dreams. And in those dreams I see myself again, me, yes, me, as I know I was: hardly able to stand up, my throat harsh, my heart pounding my chest, frozen to the marrow, filthy, skin and bones; the suffering I feel is so unbearable, so identical to the pain endured there, that I physically feel it again, I feel it throughout my whole body which becomes a mass of suffering; and I feel death fasten on me, I feel myself dying. Luckily, in my agony I scream. My scream wakes me and I emerge from the nightmare, exhausted. It takes days for everything to get back to normal, for everything to be forced back into memory, and for the skin of memory to mend again. I become myself again, the person you are familiar with, who can talk to you about Auschwitz without exhibiting or registering any anxiety or emotion.*<sup>64</sup>

For the survivor, Auschwitz is an ever-present background. Occasionally this present achieves full presence, becomes foreground. This is what occurs when the skin that surrounds memory is broken. It is the cut of remembrance. Auschwitz persists in the present as a semiotic excess. It as an excess that is continuously abjected by consciousness. The survivor does not voluntarily remember Auschwitz, the sensation that *is* Auschwitz in the now. This is because it constitutes a dangerous memory, a threat to

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<sup>63</sup> The opening to each new episode of the popular police drama *NYPD Blue* recapitulates what has occurred in previous episodes (always beginning with the catch phrase 'Previously on *NYPD Blue*'). This provides a good illustration of the fact that the previous is present, hence strictly speaking the previous is not. What is 'previous' (a criminal's history, for example, the search for 'priors') comes before but travels with. 'Presently on *NYPD Blue*' would make no sense without this previously. Memory is never simply what was, it is as much what *is*. The montage of shots from previous episodes - scenes seen, heard, felt by the characters - are part of the current episode, integral to its sense.



the self. It is a form of recollection which involves a death in life, a form in which the I is no longer. The I becomes Auschwitz. It is, therefore, not really remembrance, an activity which suggests an I casting a backward glance at past events. The memory of Auschwitz overwhelms the I. In this state it is no longer the I that expels, the '*I is expelled*'.<sup>65</sup> The border that keeps the semiotic excess in check has been breached and the self is threatened with psychosis. This is why Delbo screams. The scream is a discharge of affect, a driving out of drive. It is the expulsion of the unthinkable from the thinking being, the action that enables a return to thought. It is the nothing necessary for something to *be* again. Michel Chion states that the scream is '*to do with limitlessness*'.<sup>66</sup> This is indeed the case. The I that is in danger of disintegration, the I that is losing its shape, its borders, screams into the boundlessness that threatens to undo it.

Abjection '*is a composite of judgement and affect, of condemnation and yearning, of signs and drives*'.<sup>67</sup> It is our edge. Auschwitz was a world without edges. In the everyday we abject '*what disturbs identity, system, order*'.<sup>68</sup> In the camps what disturbed identity became all pervasive. Shit and death were everywhere. The skin of the prisoner was covered in lesions, inside becoming outside:

*There's blood on my shirt, there's blood on my chest, which is red from scratched bites; scabs are starting to form, I pull them off, and they bleed. I can't stand it any longer; I'm going to scream. I'm nothing but shit. It's true: I'm just a piece of shit.*<sup>69</sup>

In this description of his experience at Gandersheim, Robert Antelme describes himself as shit. The I is not like shit, but *is* shit. In this state the '*defilement, sewage and muck*'<sup>70</sup> that the I should find repugnant have actually become that I. The mechanisms of retching and revulsion that would normally protect the self from filth have ceased to function. In fact '*prisoners were systematically subjected to filth*', such that defilement turned into '*a*

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<sup>64</sup> (Translation emended). In particular I have chosen to translate '*cri*' as 'scream' rather than retaining Lamont's choice of 'cry'. Given that Delbo describes herself to be in agony, screaming seems a more suitable alternative. Delbo, *Days and Memory*, p. 3.

<sup>65</sup> Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, p.4.

<sup>66</sup> Michel Chion, *The Voice in Cinema*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), p.79.

<sup>67</sup> Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, p.10.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid. p.4.

<sup>69</sup> Robert Antelme, *The Human Race*, Trans. Jeffrey Haight & Annie Mahler, (Marlboro: The Marlboro Press, 1992), p.114.

<sup>70</sup> Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, p.2.

*condition of life from day to day*'.<sup>71</sup> In his book *The Survivor*, Terrence Des Pres reports on the response of men who were forced to lower their heads into bowls of their own excreta. This '*defilement caused a desperation bordering on madness*'.<sup>72</sup> The men's '*demented screams issued from the rending of subliminal structures, in response to violation of those "cleanliness habits" which are "enforced by any culture at an early stage of training"*'.<sup>73</sup> In this abject world the inmates lived on the border of psychosis. During *Man's Search for Meaning*, which includes an account of his time as a prisoner in Auschwitz, Viktor Frankl explains how '*disgust, horror and pity*' were emotions that he '*could not really feel anymore*' in the camp.<sup>74</sup> At Auschwitz and elsewhere, horror was not a threatening outside to the self. Horror became mundane. It stopped having power over the self because the self became a part of it in order to survive. The self became an aspect of horror, a piece of shit, a suppurating skin, a marasmic body, a death-in-life, a self unravelling. The symbolic - the realm of thought - which is usually ascendant, was no longer dominant in the camps. *L'univers concentrationnaire* was a semiotic universe. It was drive-orientated, a universe of sensation not cognition, a universe of pain, a pain not known but become.

### Shrunken Prose

The drives could be said to be the musculature of language. In this sense Delbo's prose is scraggy, deliberately so. Its leanness forms part of its sophistication. It is thin, emaciated, minimal writing. It is not orchidaceous, instead it is deceptively simple. It is repetitive. Mary Jacobus describes Delbo's words as having '*become colourless and wooden, leached of pleasure and affect*'.<sup>75</sup> The writing is not calculated to excite the senses. This is because Delbo wants the least possible semiotic interference in her prose. She is seeking to mend a break in the symbolic function. She writes back from semiotic excess, not into it. Céline wrote towards the semiotic, Celan sought to make his way within it, Delbo seeks to return from it. This modest writing – writing that endeavours to

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<sup>71</sup> Terrence Des Pres, *The Survivor: An Anatomy of Life in the Death Camps*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), p.57.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid. p.67.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

<sup>74</sup> Viktor E. Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning: An Introduction to Logotherapy*, (New York: Touchstone, 1984) p.34.



be as unwriterly as possible – whilst guiding Delbo back from the camps also carries the reader into them. The reduced vocabulary and the frequent use of repetition reflect the shrunken world of Auschwitz. The camps were characterized by compression. On one level this constriction was caused by the sheer number of inmates in the camps. Wolfgang Sofsky explains the effects of this forced reduction of space:

*Crowding...shifts the sensual foundations of social contact. The senses of eye and ear, those main organs of social interaction, forfeit significance to the more proximal senses of touch, heat and smell. One prisoner pushed aside the next, shoved and jostled; he pressed his sharp knees into his bedmate's body when sleeping, and irritated him with foul odors and excretions. The territories of the self – even the exterior wrappings of clothing and skin, which otherwise serve to protect the body – were constantly under threat. There were constant infringements, intrusions, and encroachments, not only because of noise, obtrusiveness, or theft, but as a result of the sheer shortage of space.<sup>76</sup>*

In the crowd, hearing and seeing assumed less importance than the intimate sensations of touch and smell (the latter senses take on great importance in early infancy but are gradually superseded). The inmates found themselves assailed by the stink of others, jostled by the bodies of others. The other was incessantly disturbing the contours of the self. Such a suffocating proximity also occurred within the confines of the self. The world became as basic as possible. It was not thought but sensed, something I will return to later. Actions lessened in intensity – ‘*we were taking shrunken steps*’ – as exhaustion overtook the body.<sup>77</sup> Movement was reduced to a minimum. Motion is life, from the faintest breath to the most furious exertion. Celan's breath-turn is a death-in-life, a moment between movements. Auschwitz was designed to curtail movement. To encourage the pseudo-death of stasis. Delbo's prose does not move. It repeats as if it is a record that has become stuck beneath the stylus:

*Sentries begin to pace around the squares. We become conscious of ourselves, we are still breathing. We are breathing in the cold. Beyond us lies the plain. The snow sparkles in refracted light. There are no beams, only light, hard and glacial, where everything is etched in sharp outline. The sky is blue, hard and glacial. One thinks of plants caught in ice. It must happen in the Arctic region, when the ice freezes even underwater vegetation. We are frozen in a block of*

<sup>75</sup> Mary Jacobus, ‘Jane Austen in the Ghetto,’ in *Women: a cultural review*, 14:1 (2003), p.77.

<sup>76</sup> Sofsky, *The Order of Terror*, pp.70-71.

<sup>77</sup> Delbo, *Auschwitz and After*, p.35.



*hard, cutting ice, transparent like a block of pure crystal. And this crystal is pierced by light, as if this light were frozen within the ice, as though ice were light. It takes a long time to realize that we are able to move within this block of ice which encloses us. We wiggle our toes within our shoes, stamp our feet. Fifteen thousand women stamp their feet yet no noise is heard. The silence is solidified into cold. We are in a place where time is abolished. We do not know whether we exist, only ice, light, dazzling snow, and us, in this ice, this light, this silence.*<sup>78</sup>

In this account of a roll call, the description is disrupted by the repetitive use of particular words, most noticeably 'light' and 'ice'. The prose moves forward and stays still. The repetition returns us to a constant, there is no development, the words open the reader to a plain of sameness. The prose is frozen in time. It is communication through non-communication. For Kristeva all literary texts comprise of a *phenotext* and a *genotext*. The two can 'be separated only for the purposes of exposition'.<sup>79</sup> The *phenotext* is allied to the symbolic and is on the side of communication. The *genotext* is associated with the semiotic and manifests itself as rhythm. Here despite my contention that Delbo is a writer who privileges the symbolic (e.g. the *phenotext*), the constant repetition of words gives the writing a rhythm that sometimes brings the *genotext* to the fore.<sup>80</sup> It is the repetition, the rhythm, which communicates something about *l'univers concentrationnaire*, something about the 'temporal law of terror,' its combining of 'cyclical recurrence with endless duration and suddenness or abruptness'.<sup>81</sup> Delbo provides us here with a cyclical prose, words that return, that go nowhere, sentences that are continuous yet without continuation. The prose says nothing because there is nothing to say. Time is sensed rather than said. This is prose that means without meaning. Meaning was a luxury at Auschwitz.

There are similarities here with Celan's poetry. The writing is sparing. There is a synaesthetic quality to the description. The lack of sound is felt rather than heard. The

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<sup>78</sup> Ibid. p.32.

<sup>79</sup> John Mowitt, *Text: The Genealogy of an Antidisciplinary Object*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 1992), p.114.

<sup>80</sup> The *genotext* consists of the drive elements in a text and can display itself through repetition. 'Designating the *genotext* in a text requires pointing out the transfers of drive energy that can be detected in phonematic devices (such as the accumulation and repetition of phonemes or rhyme) and melodic devices (such as intonation or rhythm), in the way semantic and categorial fields are set out in syntactic and logical features, or in the economy of mimesis (fantasy, the deferment of denotation, narrative, etc.)'. Julia Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, p.86.

<sup>81</sup> Sofsky, *The Order of Terror*, p.74.



writing is not elliptical but the use of repetition causes Delbo's words to move towards unmeaning. The repetition detaches the words from sense and opens them to sensation instead. It is necessary to catch something of the semiotic as part of the return to the symbolic.<sup>82</sup> This is where the writing differs from Celan's, Delbo is trying to reappropriate the symbolic. She writes a reconciliation between the semiotic and the symbolic. The consequent return of the symbolic permits the experience of Auschwitz to be spoken in the Symbolic.<sup>83</sup> Auschwitz was an ordered chaos. The inmates were subjected to practices designed to terrorize them, to horrify them. They were forced to live inside horror, at the edge of the Symbolic. It was a life of sensation. Thinking was an extravagance. Thinking is on the side of the symbolic, a part of the world of '*meaning and signification*'.<sup>84</sup> Auschwitz did not signify to the prisoner, it *showed* itself. Signification is a kind of interpretation. An encounter with an object is translated into meaning. That which shows itself does not mean, but *is*. Kristeva writes in *Powers of Horror*:

*The corpse (or cadaver: cadere, to fall), that which has irremediably come a cropper, is cesspool, and death; it upsets even more violently the one who confronts it as fragile and fallacious chance. A wound with blood and pus, or the sickly, acrid smell of sweat, of decay, does not signify death. In the presence of signified death – a flat encephalograph, for instance – I would understand, react, or accept. No, as in true theater, without makeup or masks, refuse and corpses show me what I permanently thrust aside in order to live.*<sup>85</sup>

Interpretation is a form of understanding. Auschwitz was beyond understanding. Events were not known or knowable, they were instead *shown* to the inmate. They had an immediacy that is absent in the everyday. The experience of thirst provides a good

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<sup>82</sup> Those moments when the drives are most in evidence (those passages which include an extensive use of repetition, for example) in Delbo's writing might be understood as a kind of linguistic muscularity designed to compensate for a disturbance in the skin-function. It is an aggressive prose forming '*a muscular type of self-containment – "second skin" in place of a proper skin container*'. See Esther Bick, 'The Experience of the Skin in Early Object-Relations,' in the *International Journal of Psychoanalysis* 49 (1968), p.485. Writing can give the writer a contour. Delbo stitches the semiotic into the skin of language as part of a reappropriation of the symbolic. She reshapes herself through her prose.

<sup>83</sup> The semiotic and the symbolic co-exist as signification within the Symbolic Order. For a brief outline of the distinction between the symbolic and the Symbolic, see Kelly Oliver, *Reading Kristeva: Unraveling the Double-bind*, (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1993), pp.9-10.

<sup>84</sup> Julia Kristeva, 'From One Identity to Another,' in Julia Kristeva, *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1982), p.136.

<sup>85</sup> Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, p.3.

example of this kind of unmediated encounter. In the everyday we drink before we know what thirst is, drinking is therefore evacuated of urgency. It takes the form of a social event, it is an irritation between activities, it is everything but the necessity that it is. It is taste and delectation. You never really drink until drinking becomes *you*, until there is nothing else but swilling and gulping, water, lips, tongue, throat, stomach. This is drinking. This was drinking at Auschwitz. Not the words, but the acts. The feel of the liquid. Thirst is the dream of this feeling. Thirst is nothing but the *want* of water. It is all. *'They...thought I had gone blind. It took me a long time later on to explain that, without being blind, I saw nothing. All my senses had been abolished by thirst'*.<sup>86</sup> The only sense that still remains is that of thirst. After her fellow prisoners have arranged (not without some risk) for her to be able to have a drink she is asked if the water tasted good. She does not respond. *'I hadn't felt the water's taste. I drank, that's all.'*<sup>87</sup> Taste is a kind of interpretation. It is a value judgement. It is on the side of the symbolic.

Thirst is a need.<sup>88</sup> It is first and foremost somatic. Thirst dries the tongue. It prevents speech, reduces the capacity for communication. After feeling thirst saying 'I am thirsty' no longer means thirst. Thirst has no meaning. It is felt, felt not at a distance (I feel thirst) but intimately (I thirst). For the one who has thirsted, the word 'thirst' has itself become parched, lacking. The survivor of Auschwitz sees through words, recognises their *'banality, conventionality, emptiness'*.<sup>89</sup> Meaning is skin-deep. A language that privileges the symbolic is superficial. It simply scrapes the surface of an experience. Auschwitz can only be reached unknowingly – it is beyond meaning – in the flesh of language. Flesh alone though is too much, too violent, unreasonable and unreadable. Delbo writes a cut, an incision. The symbolic is ascendant, it shores against the violence of the semiotic. Delbo's reader will not fall into Auschwitz but does not rest easy above it.

Words are empty because they are too familiar. *'There are people who say, "I'm thirsty." They step into a café and order a beer'*.<sup>90</sup> For Delbo, after Auschwitz the word

<sup>86</sup> Delbo, *Auschwitz and After*, p.142.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid. p.145.

<sup>88</sup> A need differs from a desire in that a need can be sated.

<sup>89</sup> Delbo, *Auschwitz and After*, p.239.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid. p.145.



'thirst' has been '*split in two*'.<sup>91</sup> There is an Auschwitz 'thirst' and an ordinary 'thirst'. After Auschwitz, '*thirst has turned back into a word for commonplace use*'.<sup>92</sup> Delbo wants to retrieve the sensations that were attached to words at Auschwitz. She uses repetition as a way of making words strange to themselves. Through the iteration of particular words, she bodies these words. There is a compulsion not to repeat in writing. A belief that using the same words again and again and again displays a lack of linguistic ingenuity. In certain circumstances this may be true, in Delbo's writing though, the ingenuity is *in* the repetition. The reoccurrence of particular words is an integral part of what she is trying to accomplish. Words return over and over in order to return to themselves, in order to matter:

*The whistle blows in the camp, a voice shouts: "Zell Appell" and we hear, "It's the roll call," and another, "Aufstehen," but it is not the end of the night.  
it is not the end of the night for those who are delirious in the charnel house  
it is not the end of the night for the rats feeding on still living lips  
it is not the end of the night for the stars frozen in a frozen sky  
it is not the end of the night  
it is the hour when some shadows slip back into the walls, when other shadows go out into the night  
it is not the end of the night  
it is the end of a thousand nights and a thousand nightmares.*<sup>93</sup>

The repetition of 'it is not the end of the night' graphically reinforces the night without end, this prose refuses progress. It also focuses the reader's attention on the 'not,' the 'end,' and the 'night'. The '*repetition of words and word parts*' calls attention '*to the absurd and unmotivated echoes among them at the level of syllable and letter*'.<sup>94</sup> In his essay 'Phenomenality and Materiality in Kant,' Paul de Man writes that in the works of that philosopher '*the play of the letter and of the syllable, the way of saying (Art des Sagen) as opposed to what is being said (das Gesagte),*' is what is of decisive importance.<sup>95</sup> In a sense this is also true of Delbo's prose. De Man is writing of the

<sup>91</sup> Delbo, *Days and Memory*, p.4.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid.

<sup>93</sup> Delbo, *Auschwitz and After*, p.57. (translation emended).

<sup>94</sup> J. Hillis-Miller, 'Paul de Man as Allergen,' in Eds. Tom Cohen, Barbara Cohen, J. Hillis-Miller & Andrzej Warminski, *Material Events: Paul de Man and the Afterlife of Theory*, (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2001), p.194.

<sup>95</sup> Paul de Man, 'Phenomenality and Materiality in Kant,' in Paul de Man, *Aesthetic Ideology*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), p.89.

materiality of the letter, something which emerges in similarities of sound, in alliteration, assonance, shared sibilance, in puns and rhymes. In these instances it is not the meaning of the word which is of importance but its form, its shape, its sound. In these instances it is the matter of language that matters, not the meaning. Language is made to remember the stuff it is made of.<sup>96</sup> The word *is* before it means. Auschwitz *is* before meaning. Delbo knows the mockery of language, words misshape things. She also knows that beneath their meaning, words are in themselves things. It is the thingness within words which she brings out through her use of repetition. The flesh of language which lies beneath the skin of meaning. The word is a name for a thing. Friedrich Nietzsche saw the name to be a skin: *'I have unlearned with you beliefs in words and values and great names. When the Devil casts his skin does his name not also fall away? For that too is a skin. The Devil himself is perhaps – a skin'*.<sup>97</sup> Delbo wants to slough off the name so the word can *show* itself. She wants to reveal the word as thing, to find the colour of the word again. *'Words lost their color long ago'*.<sup>98</sup>

## Outside Narration

The emergence of any meaning has required a sacrifice, an arrested potential, the death of what might have been for what is. When I feel, I feel a facet of what was felt. In his essay 'The Autonomy of Affect,' Brian Massumi describes how research has suggested that *'sensation is organized recursively before being linearized, before it is redirected outwardly to take its part in a conscious chain of actions and reactions.'*<sup>99</sup> We always think in retrospect when we are incited. The brief time that elapses between the application of stimulation and its registration – the 'I feel that' – is not an empty moment but an overfull one. Meaning – here meaning the ascription of sense to a sensation, or

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<sup>96</sup> Lea Fridman Hamaoui, in one of the most thoughtful readings of Delbo's work that I have encountered, cites a specific instance where she feels repetition is used to *matter* that which is being described. Hamaoui focuses on a passage which repeatedly uses the word 'brick'. *'The word is repeated again and again as though its repetition would aid us in grasping the brick in the ultimacy of its realized and materialized form'*. Hamaoui, 'Art and Testimony: The Representation of Historical Horror in Literary Works by Piotr Rawicz and Charlotte Delbo,' in *Cardozo Studies in Law and Literature*, 3:2 (1991), p.250.

<sup>97</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Trans. R. J. Hollingdale, (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1961), p.285.

<sup>98</sup> Delbo, *Auschwitz and After*, p.112.

<sup>99</sup> Brian Massumi, 'The Autonomy of Affect,' in *The Deleuze Reader*, Ed. Paul Patton, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), p.222.



perhaps more properly the creation of that sensation – is reductive. Massumi proposes the time before thought as recognition, to be a time of bodily thinking. Here sensation is not experienced because it is not known (in this context knowledge should be understood as the actualization of sensation). The moment between stimulation and mentation, the moment *‘which happens too quickly to have happened actually, is virtual.’*<sup>100</sup> This domain of the virtual that cannot be is *‘a realm of potential.’*<sup>101</sup> From this mess of possibilities *‘an individual action or expression will emerge and be registered consciously’.*<sup>102</sup> The expression is *willed* into becoming. The will bequeaths a sign. Without the signing will, sensation would remain virtual. Auschwitz exists as bodily thought for Delbo. It is an intensity that underlies her. *‘Intensity is qualifiable as an emotional state, and that state is static – temporal and narrative noise’.*<sup>103</sup> This intensity that exceeds narration; that is not on the side of communication, is drive energy.

The drives, arranged as they are by the various constraints imposed on the body, articulate what Kristeva calls the ‘chora’. It is *‘an essentially mobile and extremely provisional articulation constituted by movements and their ephemeral stases’.*<sup>104</sup> The chora can be posited in language, shaped by words – I write of it here – but it will never fit in these words, it is uncertain. The chora is out of time and space, out of narrative, unlike. It is noise becoming sound, it is already differentiation, it has cadence. The chora is analogous to vocal or kinetic rhythm. Resonance, vibrations, reverberations...the chora shudders...judders...oscillates... demonstrates an ordered disorder...a driving force...a motivation. The subject ferments in the semiotic chora, agitated then arrested, *‘generated and negated’.*<sup>105</sup> The semiotic continuum aligns the fragmented body of the infant, articulating *‘the connections between the (glottal and anal) sphincters in (rhythmic and intonational) vocal modulations, or those between the sphincters and family protagonists’.*<sup>106</sup> It is a positioning prior to positions, a preparation. There are spacings (modulations) but there is no space. Space needs an exterior, a substance to give it form. Think of a table, there is space on it, above it, below it, but there is no space within it.

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<sup>100</sup> Ibid. p.224.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid. p.220.

<sup>104</sup> Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, p. 25.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid. p.28.

The chora is within no space. There is no severance yet, no subject and object. There is no attribution of alterity to self the child, to assign it. The semiotic precedes the thetic phase. It is during this phase that identity or difference are asserted through the child's gestures or mouthing. The child proposes something...points at, talks to or about something...and gives to that thing a fragment of the semiotic which becomes a signifier. Kristeva locates the thetic phase of the signifying process at two points in the development of the subject, '*the mirror-phase and the "discovery" of castration*'.<sup>107</sup> The moment the child invests in the mirror-image it shapes itself and the mirror-image, the two are cut out of the continuous. The discovery of castration – the perception of lack – makes the phallic function the 'symbolic function'. '*This is a decisive moment fraught with consequences: the subject, finding his identity in the symbolic, "separates" from his fusion with the mother, "confines" his jouissance to the genital, and transfers semiotic motility onto the symbolic order*'.<sup>108</sup> The gap is now in mind, signifier and signified have become. The symbolic including fragments of the semiotic. The entry into the symbolic is an act of distancing, the mother is placed at a remove, replaced, but this distance requires the original proximity to be. The trace of the mother – the semiotic – persists in the symbolic but as its underside. In the camps however this separation collapses. Delbo describes the inmates as existing in a state of 'delirium'. The separation that is required in order to witness is always retrospective. The inmate is not in the camp, the inmate is the camp. The camp shrinks around those imprisoned within it until no distance exists between the two. The inmate is not a person who experiences events, but is the events. In her article 'Charlotte Delbo's *Auschwitz et Après*: The Struggle for Signification,' Renée A. Kingcaid draws attention to the self-reflexive nature of Delbo's prose. Delbo considers where what she writes has come from. This would seem self-evident, the experiences she relates originate in the camps. It is not so simple. For Kingcaid the prose Delbo uses in the section of *Auschwitz et Après* titled 'Le Ruisseau,' '*points out its own embellishments the better to represent, paradoxically the absolute inability to represent that defined the*

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<sup>106</sup> Ibid. pp.28-29.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid. p.46.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid. p.47.



*camps*'.<sup>109</sup> Delbo's prose foregrounds its failure. In her description of washing herself for the first time since the shower she had on arrival two months previously, Delbo writes:

*So on that day, at the stream, I must have thought of the last shower, and also of the pleasure of immersing one's body in gentle, warm water. Or perhaps I thought of all the ones who had died since our arrival without having been able to splash some water on their faces. All of this is but reported remembrances. Actually, I thought of nothing except the stream, and all my thoughts were focused on what I had to do to wash myself, to remove dirt as fast and thoroughly as possible. I was rubbing myself quickly and strongly, fortunately unable to check on the results. It would have discouraged me.*<sup>110</sup>

Her thought is reduced to a minimum. She thinks of 'nothing except the stream' and how to 'remove the dirt as fast and thoroughly as possible'. This limited think still appears complex; it requires a process of calculation. Delbo needs to choose the quickest and most efficient gestures as she washes. She then goes on to describe these gestures, washing her pubic hair and the skin of her thighs, one of her knees. Before she can start on her other knee the whistle blows to signal the end of the break, she gets dressed and rejoins the other inmates. However then she adds: '*It must have happened like this, but I have no memory of it. I only recall the stream*'.<sup>111</sup> The entire description of her washing is a deduction, it is an addition. The only certainty is the stream. In one sense this mirrors all history in that it requires the use of inferences. As Hayden White explains, '*the historian must "interpret" his materials by filling in the gaps in his information on inferential or speculative grounds*'.<sup>112</sup> Delbo knows that she was at a stream, the rest of the narrative has been deduced from that fact. I was at a stream, I must have washed. Inference fills archival gaps in the mind and the museum. Delbo's account of the stream is an example of surface memory, a willing of sensation into sense. Surface memory is meta-memory.<sup>113</sup> An after-effect of memory. Meta-memory is narrated memory. Memory taking the form of a particular narrative selected from amongst a number of possibilities.

<sup>109</sup> Renée A. Kincaid, 'Charlotte Delbo's *Auschwitz et Après*: The Struggle for Signification,' *French Forum*, 9:1, 1984, p.105.

<sup>110</sup> Delbo, *Auschwitz and After*, p.152.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid. p.153.

<sup>112</sup> Hayden White, *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism*, (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1985), p.51.

<sup>113</sup> I first advance the idea of meta-memory in my chapter 'Testimony' in *The Year's Work in Critical and Cultural Theory*, Ed. Martin McQuillan, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), In press.

Deep memory is the stream not as it is worded, not as it is willed into words, but as it was sensed. '*Deep memory preserves sensations, physical imprints*'.<sup>114</sup> This is the stream Delbo remembers. Washing – the action of cleaning oneself – is narration. Calculation is narration. The camp was beyond narrative. Narrative is belated. The stream happened then, the story of the stream came much later. The sensation of the stream is unwilled, unshaped.

For the survivor Auschwitz exists as a constant hum beneath the sound of the everyday. It is isolated from the present by the muffle that is the skin of memory, '*an impermeable skin that isolates it from my present self*'.<sup>115</sup> This skin sometimes thins. Everyday language is also a skin. A symbolic skin above a semiotic flesh. Jennifer L. Geddes has written that Jean Améry and Delbo '*experienced in their bodies the results of the decisions people such as Eichmann made*'.<sup>116</sup> The tattoo is one instance of the bodying of a bureaucratic process, of a calculated hatred. Delbo wants to lift what is beneath the skin above it. She wants to bring deep memory to the surface, to bring the body into language. To do this she scars the symbolic. Earlier I wrote that Delbo writes a cut. The cut is repetition. It is an invitation through rhythm, an opening of the prose to the force of the semiotic. White has written of Holocaust testimony as '*confirmed as an index of the events about which it speaks*' in the same way as '*a scar or a bruise*' index an event.<sup>117</sup> Here sensation scars the skin of language. The tattoo – the deep memory beneath the skin - becomes a scar on the surface of language. Delbo's words are cicatrices pushed up from the inside of the body into her writing. To read this scarring is to try to share the wound.

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Delbo's prose, whilst using plain language, involves rhythms and repetitions that lend her writing a poetic aspect. Her writing is knowingly simple; complexly

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<sup>114</sup> Delbo, *Days and Memory*, p.3.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid. p.2.

<sup>116</sup> Jennifer L. Geddes, 'Banal Evil and Useless Knowledge: Hannah Arendt and Charlotte Delbo on Evil after the Holocaust,' in *Hypatia* 18:1 (Winter 2003), p.110.

<sup>117</sup> Hayden White, 'Figural Realism in Witness Literature,' in *parallax* 30, 10:1, (January – March 2004), p.114.



uncomplicated.<sup>118</sup> I would therefore like to contrast it very briefly with the testimony of Filip Müller, which by contrast, would seem to be devoid of literary pretensions.<sup>119</sup> It is a writing without style. The prose just *describes*. Müller was one of the few members of the *Sonderkommando* to survive Auschwitz.<sup>120</sup> He recounts the horrors he has seen in a language which is devoid of ornamentation. The deep memory - the sensation – does not appear to break through. Müller description of a gassing is terrible in its effectiveness because there is no recourse to images of hell, there is no fragmentation of language; there is only what happened:

*Finally there were about 600 desperate people crammed into the crematorium. A few SS men were leaving the building and the last one locked the entrance door from the outside. Before long the increasing sound of coughing, screaming and shouting for help could be heard from behind the door. I was unable to make out individual words, for the shouts were drowned by the knocking and banging against the door, intermingled with sobbing and crying. After some time the noise grew weaker, the screams stopped. Only now and then there was a moan, a rattle, a sound of muffled knocking against the door. But soon even that ceased and in the sudden silence each one of us felt the horror of this terrible mass death.*<sup>121</sup>

Müller's testimony is without noise. It is the absence of affect in the writing, the absence of horror, which paradoxically conveys the horror. This writing does it best to shut out the semiotic. It is dead language, these are lifeless words. Although Müller's writing seems far removed from Celan's elusive verses there is a common element to both their works. Celan empties his poetry of meaning and Müller empties his prose of feeling. There two writers commune in this emptiness. They write *next to nothing*.

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<sup>118</sup> Nicole Thatcher discusses Delbo's literary technique at length (including her various stylistic innovations) in her book *A Literary Analysis of Charlotte Delbo's Concentration Camp Re-Presentation*, (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press, 2000).

<sup>119</sup> I am unable to read Müller's testimony in the original Czech. The book was actually also first published as a German translation.

<sup>120</sup> I will discuss the *Sonderkommando* or 'Special Squad' in more detail in my next chapter.

<sup>121</sup> Müller, *Eyewitness Auschwitz*, pp.33-34.

## Conclusion

### The Remains of a Day

*To have “really seen with his own eyes” a gas chamber would be the condition which gives one the authority to say that it exists and to persuade the unbeliever. Yet it is still necessary to prove that the gas chamber was used to kill at the time it was seen. The only acceptable proof that it was used to kill is that one died from it. But if one is dead, one cannot testify that it is on account of the gas chamber.<sup>1</sup>*

*If the survivor bears witness not to the gas chambers or to Auschwitz but to the Muselmann, if he speaks only on the basis of the impossibility of speaking, then his testimony cannot be denied. Auschwitz – that to which it is not possible to bear witness – is absolutely and irrefutably proven.<sup>2</sup>*

### Bare Life

Giorgio Agamben's *Remnants of Auschwitz* provides perhaps the most important philosophical reflection on testimony to be published in recent years. In his book, the *Muselmänner* become the locus for a sustained meditation on ethics and witnessing. Although the arguments put forward in *Remnants of Auschwitz* are now familiar to many, I want to briefly situate them in relation to ideas that Agamben advances in the earlier work *Homo Sacer* and also in the later work *Le temps qui reste*. In *Homo Sacer* Agamben analyses the relationship that has come to exist in modernity between *zoē* (bare, simple, natural life) and *bios* (the way of life of an individual or group).<sup>3</sup> Agamben tracks the developing relation between bare life and styled life or political life through to the emergence of National Socialism. In Ancient Greece the introduction of political society prompted the disappearance of simple, animal living. Bare life was removed from sight, relegated to the domestic, but still sited within the *polis*. That which is excluded (*zoē*) is therefore also included, it is an inclusive exclusion.<sup>4</sup> Agamben finds a link in Aristotle's *Politics* between this situation and that of the acquisition of *logos* by the subject, an

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<sup>1</sup> Jean-François Lyotard, *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute*, Trans. Georges Van Den Abbeele, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), p.3.

<sup>2</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive*, Trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen, (New York: Zone Books, 1999), p.164.

<sup>3</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, Trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), p.1.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid. p.7.



acquisition in which *phonē* (the voice) disappears yet is also preserved.<sup>5</sup> Language permits judgement and as such separates man from animal, *bios* from *zoē*. The animal feels but does not judge.<sup>6</sup> This description of the entry into language is echoed in *Remnants of Auschwitz* where Agamben describes how ‘*the living individual appropriates language in a full expropriation alone, becoming a speaking being only on condition of falling into silence*’.<sup>7</sup> He adds that ‘*there is no moment in which language is inscribed in the living voice, no place in which the living being is able to render itself linguistic, transforming itself into speech*’.<sup>8</sup> The voice is an inclusive exclusion in speech. It falls silent for speech to become. *Homo Sacer* focuses on the inclusive exclusion of bare life as a condition and identifies it as essential to sovereign power.<sup>9</sup> In the concluding part of the book Agamben seeks to build upon Foucault’s conception of biopolitics by relating it to National Socialism. Biopolitics is politics concerned with man’s everyday natural life, with issues such as health, leisure, and working practices. Agamben is interested in biopolitics because its emergence causes the sovereign imperative ‘*to make die and let live*’ (asserting the right to kill) to be replaced by the aspiration ‘*to make live and to let die*’ (privileging the care of life).<sup>10</sup> As Foucault had explained, ‘*the old power of death that symbolized sovereign power was now carefully supplanted by the administration of bodies and the calculated management of life*’.<sup>11</sup> This administration of bodies marks the incorporation of *zoē* into the political. Bare life is now the stuff of politics. Agamben suspects that ‘*the exemplary place of modern biopolitics*’ is ‘*the politics of the great totalitarian states of the twentieth century,*’ a politics which he believes Foucault did not consider.<sup>12</sup> In the final chapter of *Homo Sacer* he analyses the

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid. p.8.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. pp.7-8.

<sup>7</sup> Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz*, p.129.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid. Agamben lists two exceptions to this formulation: in the realm of theology and in the incarnation of the verb.

<sup>9</sup> Agamben develops this argument in *Homo Sacer* within the section of that name, pp.71-115.

<sup>10</sup> Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz*, p.155.

<sup>11</sup> Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality 1: The Will to Knowledge*, Trans. Robert Hurley, (London: Penguin, 1990), pp.139-140.

<sup>12</sup> Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, p.119. Agamben does Foucault a disservice here as the outlines of such a consideration do exist in his unpublished works, particularly the lecture notes for the 1975-76 course ‘Il faut défendre la société’. Alan Milchman and Alan Rosenberg draw upon this material for their own Foucauldian re-thinking of the Holocaust, an essay the published of which was almost contemporaneous with that of the Italian edition of *Remnants of Auschwitz*. See Alan Milchman and Alan Rosenberg, ‘Michel

role of the concentration camp within the politics of National Socialism. The camps function as a state of exception.<sup>13</sup> As Agamben explains, the state of exception ‘*allows for the foundation and definition of the normal legal order*’.<sup>14</sup> The essence of the camp ‘*consists in the materialization of the state of exception and in the subsequent creation of a space in which bare life and the juridical rule enter into a threshold of indistinction*’.<sup>15</sup> The state of exception becomes the norm. In this space the *Muselmann* – the unthinking and automatic body, an abject lesson in bare life – becomes ‘*the final biopolitical substance to be isolated in the biological continuum,*’ after which there is only the beyond of politics, death.<sup>16</sup> The *Muselmann* is ‘*the absolutely unwitnessable, invisible ark of bio-power*’.<sup>17</sup> It does not speak or think.<sup>18</sup> It is no longer human, yet it is not outside the human. It is the inhuman within the human.

The inhuman is the inclusive exclusion that constitutes our humanity. It is a part of us yet apart from us. Here in the *Muselmann* the inhuman has replaced the human come close to conjoining. The *Muselmann* is ‘*the threshold between the human and the inhuman*’.<sup>19</sup> Whilst the human is still present, the inhuman is not; or to put it another way, the human is, so long as we can say, ‘This is the inhuman’. If we recognise that which we call inhuman then we must recognise a part of ourselves in that inhumanity. We are not truly seeing that inhuman part of us which allows us to be, the inhuman that grounds our humanity, the impossible that makes us possible. The *Muselmann* is in some senses unknowable but crucially not in terms of recognition, it is not unrecognisable. That we recognise the *Muselmann* as something that used to be someone means that the someone that once was *still is*. This was a man, rather than this was... Agamben describes the

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Foucault, Auschwitz, and the Destruction of the Body,’ in *Postmodernism and the Holocaust*, Eds. Milchman and Rosenberg, (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1998), pp.205-237.

<sup>13</sup> The epistemological paradigm for the state of exception originates in the political writings of Carl Schmitt. There is insufficient space here to consider the ethical questions posed by Agamben’s engagement with Schmitt’s thinking.

<sup>14</sup> Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz*, p.48.

<sup>15</sup> Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, p.174.

<sup>16</sup> Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz*, p.85.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid. p.156.

<sup>18</sup> In *Remnants of Auschwitz* the *Muselmann* are gendered as masculine and the testimonies that conclude the book are all from men. It is certain that many women also reached this state of attenuation. I have here chosen the designation ‘it’ for the *Muselmann* not because of its lack of gender specificity (although the *Muselmann* might be said to be beyond the performance of gender) though, but rather because of its lack of familiarity. ‘He’ or ‘she’ seem too ordinary. The term is used advisedly however as ‘it’ is usually used to describe the non-human.



*Muselmann*, as the ‘non-human who obstinately appears as human’ and ‘the human that cannot be told apart from the inhuman’.<sup>20</sup> The ethics he advances is one founded on the principal of recognition. To truly become inhuman (hence not inhuman but perhaps non-human) would be to become unrecognisable. The earth that Gitta Sereny describes walking upon at Sobibor approaches this beyond of the human.<sup>21</sup> Only gradually is it recognised as ash. Ash is perhaps the remnant that Agamben should confront – should attest to – but he cannot.<sup>22</sup>

Agamben warns us that to deny the humanity of the *Muselmänner* ‘would be to accept the verdict of the SS and to repeat their gesture’.<sup>23</sup> For Agamben the *Muselmann* is beyond the reach of ethology in its current form. He believes that an ethics which formulates the human in terms of an obligatory communication or in terms of dignity is an ethics that is unable to recognise and account for the *Muselmann*. Agamben’s call for a means of accountability equal to the task of attesting to the *Muselmann* here resonates strongly with Judith Butler’s recent work on ethics. In *Giving an Account of Oneself*, Butler writes that ‘when we come up against the limits of any epistemological horizon, and realize that the question is not simply whether I can or will know you, but whether “you” qualify within the scheme of the human within which I operate’ then ethics requires that ‘we risk ourselves precisely there, at the moments of our unknowingness, when what conditions us and what lies before us diverge from one another, when our willingness to become undone constitutes our chance of becoming human, a becoming whose necessity knows no end’.<sup>24</sup> What Butler seems to be suggesting here is that at times it is ethically necessary to embrace the inhuman, a sentiment which resonates with Agamben’s own thinking: to bear witness to the *Muselmann*, to break with the violence of ethical silence, requires that the inhuman in the human be spoken. Testimony

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<sup>19</sup> Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz*, p.55.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid. pp.81-82.

<sup>21</sup> Gitta Sereny, *Into that Darkness: From Mercy Killing to Mass Murder*, (London: Pimlico, 1995), p.116.

<sup>22</sup> If, as Agamben contends, ‘biopower’s supreme ambition is to produce, in a human body, the absolute separation of the living being and the speaking being, *zoē* and *bios*, human and inhuman – survival,’ (Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz*, p.156.) then his witnessing has to be situated in a concentration camp. There is no place in his arguments about biopower for those camps like Sobibor which operated only as extermination camps and where one was usually dead within a few hours of arriving. This is a point I will return to later.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid. p.63.

<sup>24</sup> Judith Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself: Against Ethical Violence*, (Assen: Royal van Gorcum, 2003), p.80.

necessitates an impossible convergence, such that '*the subject of testimony is the one who bears witness to a desubjectification*'.<sup>25</sup> This means that there is no subject of testimony, rather '*every testimony is a field of forces incessantly traversed by currents of subjectification and desubjectification*'.<sup>26</sup> Witnessing is here perhaps what John Paul Ricco describes as a becoming that is unbecoming, one which does not produce '*a reduction or a suicidal renunciation of self, but rather an intense desubjectification*'.<sup>27</sup>

This desubjectification is a loss of language within language, a speaking of the unspoken; a recognition of the inhuman in the human. I would agree with Jay Bernstein that for Agamben the inhuman should be thought of as having '*something like the role of différance in Derrida: a necessary condition for the possibility of meaning that is equally its impossibility*'.<sup>28</sup> The human can never be fully present to its self, self-presence or self-sameness is an illusion. When I say I am in this I, I can never mean what I say. Testimony thus becomes a bearing witness to the '*impossibility of conjoining the living being and language, phōnē and logos, the inhuman and the human,*' to the impossibility that makes any and all testimony possible.<sup>29</sup> The gap – the space that produces a relation between, albeit in the form of a non-relation – is where testimony takes place. This gap – the impossible conjunction, the disjunction – is bodied by the *Muselmann*, a figure manifesting both the inhuman capacity to survive the human and the human capacity to survive the inhuman. The *Muselmann* is seemingly the impossible made possible, the complete witness. For Agamben the '*paradox here is that if the only one bearing witness to the human is the one whose humanity has been wholly destroyed, this means that the identity between human and inhuman is never perfect and that it is not truly possible to destroy the human, that something always remains*'.<sup>30</sup> The notion of the remnant requires a particular conception of the inhuman in order to function; one which a principle of humanity based on recognition might significantly trouble.

<sup>25</sup> Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz*, pp.120-121.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid. p.121.

<sup>27</sup> John Paul Ricco, *The Logic of the Lure*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), p.21.

<sup>28</sup> J.M. Bernstein, *Adorno: Disenchantment and Ethics*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p.388 (n15).

<sup>29</sup> Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz*, p.130.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid. pp.133-134.



## The Remnant I

To move beyond the category of relation – to abandon our abandonment to the law, to sovereignty – requires ‘*nothing less than an attempt to think the political-social factum no longer in the form of a relation*’.<sup>31</sup> The path to the relationless (the unrelated is, of course, relational in its very unrelatedness to the relation) lies in the remnant. The remnant is relational, in the *Muselmann* the human continues to *relate* to the inhuman as a part of a figure that has ceased to be human whilst not having become inhuman. The *Muselmann* does not relate to something (e.g. human to inhuman) but is that very relation (the ‘to’ between the human and the inhuman). As Düttmann explains, ‘*in order not to relate, and to break with the “logic of sovereignty” as well as with the bad infinity of iterability, of a perpetual, always renewed and always frustrated relating, one must retain oneself in the relating of the relation*’.<sup>32</sup> Agamben echoes this in *Remnants of Auschwitz* when he writes firstly of the remnant of Israel as ‘*neither the whole people nor a part of the people but, rather the non-coincidence of the whole and the part,*’ and then of the remnants of Auschwitz as ‘*neither the dead nor the survivors, neither the drowned nor the saved*’ but ‘*what remains between them*’.<sup>33</sup> The ethical subject is therefore a witness who relates to this relation. Such a witness resists the efforts of bio-power to separate the human and the inhuman, their witnessing does not relate to either of those terms but rather to the very fact that they are in relation. Ethics in *Remnants of Auschwitz* centres upon testifying to this connection, the production of such a testimony ensures the preservation of this relation. In *Trauma and the Memory of Politics*, Jenny Edkins emphasises that the ultimate aim of biopower is to sever all connection between the human and the inhuman. The *Muselmänner* would be proof of the successful accomplishment of this aim if they survived intact. Testimony however demonstrates the failure of this endeavour to divide, hence ‘*in its very form, testimony contests sovereign power*’.<sup>34</sup> For Agamben the ultimate achievement of National Socialism would be the (of necessity violent) separation of the human and the inhuman, however the

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<sup>31</sup> Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, p.60.

<sup>32</sup> Düttmann, ‘Never Before, Always Already,’ p.5.

<sup>33</sup> Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz*, pp.163-164.

<sup>34</sup> Jenny Edkins, *Trauma and the Memory of Politics*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: 2003), p.189.

witness who acknowledges the *Muselmann* refuses such a separation by attesting to a persisting relation. The only true separation is the destruction of any sense of relation; it would mean the *Muselmann* becoming a non-human, neither inhuman nor human. The relation is of course, in a sense, just this.

It could be argued that by privileging the relation Agamben enacts the very violence he seeks to prevent. The relation is, after all, not to be confused with an undecidable, it is not an aporia. The neither/nor of the undecidable in deconstruction is relational but it is not the relation. The relation cannot be equated with the undecidable but rather exists within it. The zone of indistinction that Agamben is proposing – the remnant – separates from separation by becoming that separation.<sup>35</sup> Agamben is proposing a witness who testifies to the relating that enables a situation of neither/norism to arise. In the undecidable neither relates to nor, neither/nor relates to either/or, the undecidable is decisively multiple (prior to the decision which causes it to obsolesce) whereas the relation is what it *is*, it is its *that-it-relatedness* and nothing more. It is singular. The idea of a relating to relation - of the importance of the idea of the remnant - is developed in far greater depth in Agamben's remarkable book *Le temps qui reste* which was published subsequent to *Remnants of Auschwitz*. The two books are deeply imbricated. *Le temps qui reste* is an extended exegesis of the first line of Paul's Epistle to the Romans. A quotation from Romans (coupled with one from Isaiah) opens *Remnants of Auschwitz*. In *Le temps qui reste*, Agamben explores the idea of messianic temporality as it is articulated in *Romans*, messianic time is radically contracted time, it is time as remnant. The remnant is the time that remains between time and its end. It is a time between times.<sup>36</sup> Agamben describes it briefly in *Remnants of Auschwitz* as 'neither historical time nor eternity but, rather, the disjunction that divides them'.<sup>37</sup> Eternity is time's end.

In the between times that is messianic time the quality of becoming what remains is one that is shared by the newly emergent messianic law. Paul notes that biblical law acts primarily through the institution of division, the creation of separation, '*il semble*

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<sup>35</sup> Agamben explicitly equates the idea of the remnant with the zone of indistinction in *Le temps qui reste* (Agamben 2000, 123-124).

<sup>36</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *Le temps qui reste*, Trans. Judith Revel, (Paris: Rivages, 2000), p.105.

<sup>37</sup> Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz*, p.164.



*donc prendre au sérieux le sens étymologique du mot grec 'nomos' – don't il se sert pour désigner non seulement la Torah mais la loi en général -, qui dérive du verbe 'nemein', diviser, attribuer des parties'.<sup>38</sup>* The fundamental separation of Jewish law is that between the Gentile and the Jew, the Jew's circumcision marks this division. Paul overcomes this pivotal division through instituting another division, that between flesh and spirit. He separates separation: *'For he is not a Jew, which is one outwardly; neither is that circumcision, which is outward in the flesh: / But he is a Jew, which is one inwardly; and circumcision is that of the heart, in the spirit, and not in the letter; whose praise is not of men, but of God'* (Romans 2: 28-29). The introduction of this new division within the divided causes the separation of the faithful founded in the flesh to become uncertain. The circumcised may not be Jews. The uncircumcised may not be not-Jews. The body is not the guarantor of faith, the spirit is.<sup>39</sup> For Agamben this gesture represents the creation of a remnant, the Jews and the non-Jews do not include everyone, people remain outside of either category. This remnant – the not not-Jew - falls under messianic law. This is not a universal category, the not not-Jew does not encompass all the Jews nor all the Gentiles. Nor does the not-not Jew identify a particular part of the Jews or Gentiles; rather it describes the impossibility of self-coincidence for either identity: *'...cela ne signifie pas que les non non-Juifs soient seulement une partie des Juifs ou des non-Juifs. Ils représentent plutôt l'impossibilité pour les Juifs et les goyim de coïncider avec eux-mêmes, ils sont comme une sorte de reste entre chaque peuple et lui-même, ou entre chaque identité et elle-même'.<sup>40</sup>* Pauline thought is not concerned with identifying an underlying unity between divided peoples but rather with dividing division itself and thereby rendering the original division inoperative. The remnant is the result of this dividing division. In its prevention of coincidence the remnant appears similar to Derrida's concept of the trace, that which names the impossibility of the sign achieving total presence and presentness. The separating of separations is a form of preparation for

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<sup>38</sup> 'He seems to take the etymological sense of the Greek word *nomos* seriously – he uses it not just to signify the Torah but law in general – which derives from the word *nemein*, divide, apportion'. Agamben, *Le temps qui reste*, p.79.

<sup>39</sup> For a useful discussion of the Pauline notion of circumcision see James Shapiro, *Shakespeare and the Jews*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), pp.117-121.

<sup>40</sup> 'This does not mean that the not not-Jews only form a part of the Jews or the not-Jews. They represent rather the impossibility of the Jews and the Gentiles to coincide with themselves, they are like a kind of

the telos that is the end of time. The aim of dividing division is to open the way to an eventual fulfillment of the messianic promise. The time will arrive at which time ends.

### The Pornography of Horror

What should now be becoming apparent is that *Remnants of Auschwitz* says very little about Auschwitz. Auschwitz provides the backdrop for the elaboration of a philosophical argument, an argument centring upon the remnant. This argument does not require Auschwitz, in fact ultimately it might said to be indifferent to it.<sup>41</sup> Jay Bernstein is therefore fully justified in decrying the losses necessary for Agamben's argument to be made, the frames of reference that disappear through this almost exclusive focus on the *Muselmann*, and the inhuman. Bernstein writes of his repugnance and revulsion at Agamben's inability to '*veer off from the space of impossible sight to the wider terrain: from the victims to the executioners, to the nature of the camps, to the ethical dispositions of those set upon reducing the human to the inhuman*'.<sup>42</sup> He goes on to equate Agamben's philosophic practice with photography in that it removes from consideration one by one '*the historical, the political and above all the moral frames through reference to which some understanding of the meaning of the Muselmann might be achieved*'.<sup>43</sup> For Bernstein photography is oriented towards '*abstraction, isolation and de-contextualization*'.<sup>44</sup> This is precisely what he believes Agamben does to the figure of the *Muselmann*.

Bernstein also suggests that Agamben introduces an element of pornography into his account of the *Muselmann* because bearing witness to this near death-in-life requires bearing witness to an ignoble body, '*what is looked upon is a body without dignity*'.<sup>45</sup> Agamben's portrayal of the *Muselmann* is pornographic because '*pornography contains*

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remnant between each people and themselves, or between each identity and itself'. Agamben, *Le temps qui reste*, p.87.

<sup>41</sup> See Düttmann's comments in this regard in 'Never Before, Always Already,' p.5.

<sup>42</sup> J.M. Bernstein, 'Bare Life, Bearing Witness: Auschwitz and the Pornography of Horror,' in *parallax* 30 10:1 (January-March 2004), p.7.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid. p.12.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid. p.8. I am less convinced than Bernstein that a body without dignity is necessarily always a pornographic body. I am also uncertain whether all bodies that appear within pornography are *de facto* undignified, although the majority may well be unfitting.



*within itself both ethical blindness and ethical insight*'.<sup>46</sup> The *Muselmann* shares this quality of ethical ambiguity. The pornography of sex involves '*the objectification and degradation of women*' and the '*aestheticisation of the sexual in which reverberates, through that very aestheticisation, the claim of the sweetness of life which is but the reverse side of suffering and the fragmented body*'.<sup>47</sup> The sexual act (in its doing and depiction) is the means through which human beings have '*experienced nature as condition and limit, as animating and violating,*' and in that doubleness as a '*condition for culture in general*'.<sup>48</sup> Sex fucks with *bios*. Making love (which unlike Bernstein, I believe to be an almost entirely cultural affair) occasionally shifts into what I have chosen here to call fucking.<sup>49</sup> The fuck is the moment when decorum (which does play a part in sex) gives way to dismemberment. The whole body (the illusion of completeness that is the cultural physique) breaks into pleasurable parts. The fuck is the moment when our '*animal bodies...routinely receive an emphatic moment of independence from cultural norms*'.<sup>50</sup> It is only through this escape from our acculturation – through a kind of disembodiment – that we enter a position from which we are able to understand our own embodiment. The body we live with only becomes known to us through the little death that is the orgasm. Sex undoes culture; it brings us to the brink of bare life from which we then come back to culture again. The fuck allows us to touch the outside that grounds culture, the nothing. Nathalie Gassel writes of '*le rien qui se passe dans le sexe. L'excitation que le plus souvent nous évitons mais qui resurgit toujours. Ce rien est une préoccupation constante. Il reprend place dès qu'on ne le pourchasse plus, dès les premiers relâchements*'.<sup>51</sup> This nothing that occurs during the fuck (the fuck to nothing, or nothing-fuck) opens us to the sweetness of life, whilst also reminding of our vital bodies, the flesh that suffers to let us live. Fucking involves pleasure and pain.

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid. p.10.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid. p.11.

<sup>49</sup> Terms like 'having sex' and 'making love' seem too much on the side of culture to catch the transgressive dimension of the sexual encounter that Bernstein is trying to describe here, it could indeed be said that the prose he uses is far too 'dignified'. Fucking - because of its impropriety - seems a more appropriate description.

<sup>50</sup> Bernstein, 'Bare Life, Bearing Witness,' p.9.

<sup>51</sup> 'The nothing that happens in sex. The excitement that we usually try to avoid but that always reappears. This nothing is a continual preoccupation. It takes it place again the moment we cease to pursue it, the moment we begin to let ourselves go'. Nathalie Gassel, *Éros androgyne*, (Paris: L'Acanthe, 2000), p.70.

Pornography contains the trace of the fuck. Bernstein believes that the *Muselmann* forms part of a pornography of horror to which atrocity photographs also belong.<sup>52</sup> The negatively pornographic quality of some atrocity photographs '*involves the framing of devastation for the sake of the moral satisfaction of the liberal gaze*'.<sup>53</sup> As pornography is the aestheticization of sex so atrocity photography is the aestheticization of horror. For Bernstein the violent immediacy of the atrocity photograph '*constitutes the aestheticization of representation that is the fulfillment of witnessing*'.<sup>54</sup> He believes that the *Muselmann* in *Remnants of Auschwitz* is comparable to the photograph in that it is similarly shorn of context. What Agamben craves is an '*absoluteness of witnessing*,' an absolute untroubled by the impurity of any context.<sup>55</sup>

### Men Without Context

Bernstein's contention that the absence of context in Agamben's figuring of the *Muselmänner* makes them equatable with atrocity photographs is not without its problems. Are atrocity photographs truly as abstract as Bernstein appears to believe, even in the absence of any textual accompaniment? That the photograph cannot coincide with the photographed - even photographing a photograph institutes a gap between original and copy - is not in doubt. The photograph however is its own reality, and as such (as John Tagg explains) '*a material product of a material apparatus set to work in specific contexts, by specific forces, for more or less defined purposes*'.<sup>56</sup> The context does not admittedly inhere within the photograph, rather the photograph is gifted a context. In writing of photographs as oriented towards 'de-contextualization' however, what Bernstein does not ask is in what context 'context' emerges. Context is not inherent in anything. In this sense all the world's a photograph, or rather all the world's a negative

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<sup>52</sup> Whilst Bernstein's arguments are persuasive here, I find his choice of the term 'pornography' difficult to reconcile with the subject matter. The word pornography was originally used to describe writings about the activities of prostitutes. I do not feel it can successfully be separated from those origins in sex. It is quite clear however that what Bernstein labels the 'pornography of horror' is to be understood as a source of moral and not sexual titillation.

<sup>53</sup> Bernstein, 'Bare Life, Bearing Witness,' p.11.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid. p.12.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid. p.14.

<sup>56</sup> John Tagg, *The Burden of Representation: Essays on Photographies and Histories*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), p.3.



awaiting its contextual exposure. Our every encounter with the world is with what is initially, necessarily an abstract world. We are therefore in constant danger of falling into a form of narcissism (although what form this narcissism might take depends upon the context), a point I will develop later. Context is the after-effect of all encounters. The abstraction that Bernstein and others discover in particular photographs is belated. It is itself a context. Context is the meaning we carry to the world (and which carries us within it). Nothing *is* without context.<sup>57</sup> No man *is* without context. And in this sense context is frustrating. Context gets in the way; it obstructs our efforts to touch anything, although at the same time it facilitates any and all touching. If the *Muselmann* were truly abstract (hence not abstract at all, as abstraction is itself a form of context) and de-contextualised, it would be unrecognizable to us. If Agamben could place the *Muselmann* on the outside of context it might in fact be the ethical thing to do. The *Muselmann* would be immediate. But this ethics located in the outside of context would be an impossible ethics. Ethics are *in* context. It would also make nonsense of Agamben's desire to ground ethics in witnessing. Witnessing is usually understood to operate within contexts of recognition.<sup>58</sup> If the *Muselmann* were rendered unrecognizable it would also be made invisible, it could not be attested to. It would be outside the relational. All contexts relate; this is what allows us to move in and out of them. Agamben, for whom the witness is of paramount importance, does not therefore seem to be interested in this kind of (impossible) ethics. The remnant requires terms of relation within which to reside, these provide its context.

Whilst Bernstein is not suggesting that a photograph can have no context, he feels it can be oriented towards such an absence. It is difficult however to talk of degrees of context. A photograph looked at face down might be said to have less context than one face up. This would however be a senseless statement because nothing 'has' context in the sense of possessing and inhering that having 'has'. It would also not make sense

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<sup>57</sup> There is no context of contexts, a context which could be found that would be sufficient to Auschwitz. This is not to say that Auschwitz should not be placed in context, it always already is. Some contexts should be favoured over others but judgements upon a given context must be made in the knowledge that they are never made out of context.

<sup>58</sup> For an example of an attempt to think witnessing outside of recognition see Kelly Oliver, *Witnessing: Beyond Recognition*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001). Oliver gives a succinct summation of her key arguments in *Witnessing* in the essay 'Witnessing and Testimony,' in *parallax* 30 10:1 (January-March 2004), pp.78-87.

because the contexts we carry (and that carry us) are individual to us. A photograph face down for example - revealing the photographic paper in its almost whiteness, perhaps imprinted with the name of the paper manufacturer, possibly marked with the history of those who have handled it and the surfaces it has rested upon – might have more context carried to it by an admirer of abstract art than its figured front. That said, our individual contexts usually overlap, we have shared carryings. There are also good and bad contexts which can, at least in part, be gauged against those carryings.<sup>59</sup> This is why I feel Bernstein's point about the loss of context in Agamben's figure of the *Muselmann* is still a highly important one. It is certainly true that when the subject is greeted with an image of suffering without any encouragement to context that a pity approaching abstraction is generated. We see suffering only in the context of its haecceity, it is a *now* without history. Because this suffering is encountered with little to facilitate context, it comes to feed only '*our moral sensibility, our sentimental attachment to our own moral sensitivity*'.<sup>60</sup> The loss of context encourages a moral narcissism in the viewer. Moral narcissism, as Judith Butler has explained, is a form of ethical violence. It institutes a citadel self, one that refuses to relate to the other.<sup>61</sup> If this non-relating were ever total, the self would become inhuman.<sup>62</sup> The self would cease to be. By paring context as he does, Agamben may make possible the very outcome that he seeks to prevent. He risks severing the relation between the human and the inhuman. The remnant – that which is supposed to testify to the enduring relation – becomes instead a caesura, a gap that separates the human and the inhuman.

Geoffrey Hartman shares Bernstein's concerns about context. He is similarly disconcerted by Agamben's privileging of the *Muselmänner*, especially at the expense of the '*thousands of survivor testimonies that actually exist*'.<sup>63</sup> Hartman, despite his avowed

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<sup>59</sup> For a discussion of the varying contexts which have been bought to photographs of the Holocaust, see Barbie Zelizer's *Remembering to Forget: Holocaust Memory through the Camera's Eye*, (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1998).

<sup>60</sup> Bernstein, 'Bare Life, Bearing Witness,' p.12.

<sup>61</sup> What I am calling the citadel self here should be understood as the microcosm to the macrocosm of O.K. Werckmeister's citadel society, which he gives an account of in the much neglected *Citadel Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), pp.5-9. The citadel society should therefore be understood as a society founded on ethical violence. It is a form of society that cannot look beyond itself.

<sup>62</sup> Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself*, p.60.

<sup>63</sup> Geoffrey Hartman, *Scars of the Spirit: The Struggle Against Inauthenticity*, (New York: Palgrave, 2002), p.90.



misgivings, is, however, somewhat reassured by Agamben's decision to include testimony from the *Muselmänner* at the end of *Remnants of Auschwitz*.<sup>64</sup> It is true that the book does conclude with testimonial excerpts from survivors who felt they had been *Muselmänner*, but Agamben's professed desire to let them have the last word is paradoxical. These testimonies are retrospective, they are not from the death-in-life but from lives rescued from that living-death. The excerpts act to reinforce Agamben's claim that the *Muselmann* cannot be attested to in ordinary speech. These testimonies exist in the realm of the relation of a survivor to what has been survived, the voices are distinct. The coda testifies to the *Muselmann* but these survivors do not speak as the *Muselmann*, they speak of the relation rather than from the relation. For Agamben resistance resides in relating to the relation. The relation is attested to but never testifies. In *Remnants of Auschwitz*, even the *Muselmänner*, the bodies that are made to matter, remain strangely absent.

## The Remnant II

The remnant – as it is figured by Agamben in the context(s) of Auschwitz – prompts further questions. As the relation between *bios* and *zoē*, between political life and bare life (which is almost equatable with the relation between life and death), the remnant, whilst outside the structure of sovereignty cannot be said to be beyond the machinations of power. In fact the remnant as relation might be said to be the very locus of power. In the everyday we are always, in a sense, outside power. We occupy the end-points of the relations that constitute power. We experience its effects. The *Muselmann* when described as a remnant, as what remains between the human and the inhuman, becomes a figure in power. The death-in-life becomes a hypostatization of power as the relational. Perhaps the only way to be outside power is to be within it, nonetheless to read the *Muselmann* as a figure of resistance seems misplaced. Resistance occurs in response to the effects of power. Surviving in the camps is resistance. If we read the *Muselmann* in terms of Foucault's conception of power then we might contend that the production of this life-in-death (the remnant) is the crowning achievement of National Socialism.

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid. p.245 (n 20).

Power usually traverses the body; the docile body that Foucault describes in *Discipline and Punish* is ‘*manipulated by authority*’.<sup>65</sup> Here the body is no longer in power, it is power. The *Muselmann* as it is described by Agamben (the relation that remains between the human and the inhuman, the remnant that is this emaciated body) is nothing but the relation that is power. Power is not something that can usually be given form – power is not possessed by the leader of a country, or the high-court judge, or the camp guard. To see power in these people is not to see clearly. Power is insubstantial and invisible. We only register its effects. Relations are ethereal. In the *Muselmann* the relation is made palpable. To bear witness to this relation is therefore to attest to an abominable manifestation of power. The *Muselmann* does need to be attested to but not within the context of resistance. Resistance requires the preservation of the relational. It could even take the form of the preservation of this relation. It is not however to be found in becoming the relation. The remnant appears a useful concept but elaborated in this context it becomes deeply troubling. How is relating to the relation as a strategy of resistance against the structure of sovereignty to be differentiated from relating to the relation as a bodying of power? Can an ethics be situated in such an ambiguous witnessing? For what is it that we actually witness in the *Muselmann* as remnant?

Perhaps we replicate the gesture of the SS if we *do* privilege the remnant, if we accept Agamben’s belief that that relating to relation is as close as words can get to the bodies that matter. For Agamben language is an out of body experience. A gap prevents the matter that is (not) me from speaking. I cannot coincide with the I that I say or write. I am apart. The definition of testimony that Agamben elaborates in *Remnants of Auschwitz* originates in this cleft between speech and soma. The living being (the breathing, feeling, pulsing being of the body) and the subject (the speaking, thinking, writing being) never coincide. The living being and the subject share an intimate distance, a proximate gap.<sup>66</sup> In the moment I begins to speak a split between the living being and the speaking being occurs. It cannot be undone. I lose me to be me. I as body am always behind speaking, behind writing. ‘I’ appears on the page as a tangible, touchable character, yet this column of ink that is I supports nothing other than itself. I am not in I. You are not in You. The

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<sup>65</sup> Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, Trans. Alan Sheridan, (London: Penguin, 1977), p.155.

<sup>66</sup> Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz*, p.125.



materiality of the letters that make up you and I do not coincide with the matter that at this moment is following them across the page...the matter of the reader. The eyes that scan these words are not yours, you never occupy them. You are disembodied, immaterial. *“I” is neither a notion nor a substance, and enunciation concerns not what is said in discourse but the pure fact that it is said, the event of language as such, which is by definition ephemeral*.<sup>67</sup> Ephemeral event of your reading these lines. Signs without substance, these substitutions are the stuff that lives are made on. I live as and in language, a space outside of the not-me that is my matter. Writing demonstrates this gap. As I write my hand rests upon the page not within it, the ink flows from a pen not from my fingers. Were I instead to scratch these words that I write now into the page, I would still not be within the scratches. There is always mediation, the nib that gets in the way of my body and my language, my ‘mys’. I relate to me through this nib. I want to argue here where ‘I’ am not that in *Remnants of Auschwitz* Agamben’s conception of language is wanting. I want to break the nib, blend the blood and the ink, blink and find my I’s together. If I were to write ‘I’ in my blood would I be in this bloody ‘I’? No, I would not. Agamben’s conception of language does however limit the ink. Looking back at Delbo’s writing (a writing which forms part of the context Agamben sacrifices in his almost exclusive on the trope of the *Muselmann*<sup>68</sup>) with its semiotic intensity; it seems possible to read her work as pushing the subject back from the body, back towards the symbolic. For Agamben, desubjectification is a state in which the human being ceases to have language. If we construe language differently though – working with a Kristevan understanding of signification instead – then desubjectification is not a not-having language but a having language in which the symbolic aspect has been made almost inoperative. Desubjectification is another way of describing the subject’s descent into psychosis. The *Muselmann* is in an equivalent state to the psychotic, close to a return to the night out of which the subject became. The *Muselmann* is the *‘person who is about to*

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid. p.138.

<sup>68</sup> Delbo also does not mention the *Muselmänner* by name, and writes of many aspects of camp life. This makes her testimony deniable in Agamben’s terms. As I will discuss later, for Agamben it is only when *‘the survivor bears witness not to the gas chambers or to Auschwitz but to the Muselmann,’* when *‘he speaks only on the basis of an impossibility of speaking,’* that *‘his testimony cannot be denied’* (Ibid. p.164). Delbo’s testimony is therefore questionable.

*die and is alone,* a physical manifestation of Celan's '*dark and truncated language*'.<sup>69</sup> Both Delbo's prose and Celan's poetry speak from where – in Agamben's conception of language – speech is impossible.

Their writings contain elements of both *bios* and *zoē*. The semiotic is the bare life of signification. It is the remnant of the noise that continues to reverberate within the sound of sense that is the symbolic. In times of crisis the noise resurges and threatens to engulf all sounds. The *Muselmänner* were becoming noise, the testimonies at the end of *Remnants of Auschwitz* mark a return to sound. The survivor writes back to sound (to *be* and to be heard). The *Muselmannen* are a unique category of inmates within the camps, but the danger of falling out of shape, of succumbing to the horror, was one shared by many others. To focus on the *Muselman* at the expense of all others seems a violent act of censorship and as a strategy to refute Holocaust denial it is also fraught with danger.

### Denying the Denier

For Agamben it is only the survivor who bears witness to the *Muselmann* – who speaks '*only on the basis of the impossibility of speaking*'<sup>70</sup> – who gives undeniable testimony. This undeniable testimony constitutes the coda which concludes the book. The Holocaust deniers of this world (as opposed to those that exist solely in the world of thought) are unlikely to be troubled in their opinions by these six pages of testimony, testimony that '*absolutely and irrefutably*' proves Auschwitz.<sup>71</sup> Denial is anyway a kind of acceptance. If the testimonies of writers such as Jean Améry, Tadeusz Borowski, Paul Celan, Charlotte Delbo and Elie Wiesel are deniable then this as much affirms the value of their work as it repudiates it.<sup>72</sup> The refusal to acknowledge testimony requires an acknowledgement of its existence prior to the act of refusal. The testimony *is* there to be denied. The denier must disavow the troubling matter that is the testimony upon which the action of denial is founded. Denial requires something to deny. In a sense the

<sup>69</sup> Primo Levi, 'On Obscure Writing,' in *Other People's Trades*, Trans. Raymond Rosenthal, (London: Abacus, 1991), p.161.

<sup>70</sup> Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz*, p.164.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.



Holocaust denier relies upon the Holocaust more than any other person, if there was no Holocaust then the denier would and could not be. I am certain that this argument has been made many times before but it needs reiterating. Agamben's thinking is dangerous here. By removing Auschwitz and the gas-chambers he is removing the deniable. This may indeed cause the end of denial but at what expense. The figure of the *Muselmann* (the trope that is Agamben's argument) may be undeniable, but perhaps this is because it is not anything. It is not testimony; it is nothing but an exercise in thought. It does not try to bear witness to the matter of Auschwitz but rather to the limits of a particular way of thinking. That way of thinking may have contributed to the production of Auschwitz but cannot be equated with it. To privilege the *Muselmann* – construed as the remnant – as the proof of Auschwitz might end denial but could also cause that which is denied to be understood as irrelevant. My concern is that the *Muselmann* as it is conceived by Agamben – as the figure of which the attestation is ultimate and irrefutable – actually relies upon the Holocaust denier. In a gesture designed to deny denial Agamben actually inadvertently reaffirms it. Auschwitz would not need to be 'absolutely and irrefutably proven' without the presence of the denier. Therefore the Holocaust denier is integral to Agamben's argument. The Holocaust denier is not however integral to the memory of the Holocaust, only the witness is. The Holocaust denier is admittedly a form of witness, but certainly not the only form and obviously the least desirable and the most loathsome. The film-maker, the historian, the philosopher, the survivor, all are forms of witness who ensure the memory of the Holocaust. These forms however are not central to Agamben's argument, only the denier is. Agamben's position is one which presupposes and therefore perpetuates Holocaust denial, despite an obviously deep desire to refute it.

In *Remnants of Auschwitz* Agamben quotes from the beginning of Jean-François Lyotard's *The Differend*. Part of the passage that he cites is quoted at the beginning of this chapter. Agamben, however, in his emphasis on 'the impossibility of speaking' as the sole basis for an adequate (undeniable) testimony, shifts the focus of witnessing away from the gas chambers, away from what might be called 'the impossibility of their seeing'. He briefly mentions the *Sonderkommando* (Special Squad) in his preface and in

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<sup>72</sup> Works by all these writers (with the exception of Tadeusz Borowski) are cited elsewhere in this thesis. For a translation of many of Borowski's stories from his time in Auschwitz see *This Way for the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen*, (London: Penguin, 1976).

the opening chapter.<sup>73</sup> The special squads worked in the gas chambers on an almost daily basis, at times. It is during his discussion about the insufficiency of all ethical categories that possess a juridical origin, that Agamben mentions Levi's 'grey zone', '*where the oppressed becomes oppressor and the executioner in turn appears as victim*'.<sup>74</sup> He quotes from Levi's remarks about Miklos Nyiszli's account of a football match that took place between the SS and the *Sonderkommando*, before stating that '*this moment of normalcy*' is '*the true horror of the camp*'.<sup>75</sup> Agamben, however, then fails to respond to Levi's injunction not to '*close one's mind*' to thinking about the special squads.<sup>76</sup> The special squads are not easily transformed into a remnant and cannot be integrated into the specific argument Agamben wants to make about biopolitics. They are therefore extraneous to *Remnants of Auschwitz*. I would like to consider what is lost by 'closing one's mind' to these particular inmates. Obviously I am not seeking to privilege the testimony of the *Sonderkommando* over those accounts that attest to the *Muselmann*. I do however want to offer an alternative to a testimony based on the 'impossibility of speaking'.

### The Writings in the Earth

The *Sonderkommando* were '*entrusted with the running of the crematoria*'.<sup>77</sup> As Levi explains, their task was '*to maintain order among the new arrivals (often completely unaware of the destiny awaiting them) who must be sent into the gas chambers; to extract the corpses from the chambers, pull gold teeth from jaws, cut the women's hair, sort and classify clothes, shoes, and the contents of luggage; transport the bodies to the crematoria and oversee the operation of the ovens; extract and eliminate the ashes*'.<sup>78</sup> At Auschwitz, the members of the *Sonderkommando* were mainly charged with emptying the gas chambers and operating the ovens, they transported and burned bodies. Wolfgang

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<sup>73</sup> For a discussion of Agamben's rather loose use of the testimony of Zelman Lewental (a member of the *Sonderkommando*) in his Preface see Philippe Mesnard & Claudine Kahan, *Giorgio Agamben: À l'Épreuve d'Auschwitz*, (Paris: Éditions Kimé, 2001), pp.23-27.

<sup>74</sup> Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz*, p.21.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid. p.26.

<sup>76</sup> Primo Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, (London: Abacus, 1989), p.37.

<sup>77</sup> Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, p.34.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.



Sofsky writes that the behaviour of the *Sonderkommando* ‘cannot be judged by the conventional moral conceptions of civil society’.<sup>79</sup> The members of the Special Squads form part of the ethical grey zone that Levi writes about, a zone ‘with ill-defined outlines which both separate and join the two camps of masters and servants’.<sup>80</sup> Levi urges the reader to bear witness to these men, to resist the temptation to label them abject and unthinkable.

In the previous chapter I briefly discussed the testimony of the *Sonderkommando* member Filip Müller in relation to the works of Celan and Delbo. Müller wrote his account after the liberation of Auschwitz. He survived. There are however other accounts from others who died in the camp. Several members of the special squads buried manuscripts in the vicinity of the crematoria which gave an account of their experiences or expressed their belief that it was impossible to so do. In 1945 writings by Haïm Herman, Lejb Langfus and two by Zalmen Gradowski were found. In 1952 another text attributed to Langfus was located. The first manuscript by Zalmen Lewental was found in 1961 and a second was recovered a year later. Finally, in 1980 a text by Marcel Nadsari was unearthed.<sup>81</sup> Agamben cites the testimony of Lewental in his preface. He does not consider the matter of this piece of writing though. A piece of writing that lay beneath the ground for over fifteen years, until it was finally discovered on the 28<sup>th</sup> July 1961. Agamben does not describe the condition of the manuscript, the effects of its time below ground in the damp and darkness. He does not date it. He also does not mention the other writings I have detailed which survived, such as the second much longer piece by Lewental, a piece which consisted of eighty eight fragments that had to be painstakingly put back together by Ber Mark.<sup>82</sup> He does not discuss the physical condition of the writings, especially those found later, ‘rongé par l’humidité et donc partiellement illisibles’.<sup>83</sup> This corpus of testimony is decayed. Parts of the writing have become unwritten. I wrote in my first chapter about the problem of reinvigoration inherent in any engagement with the pamphlets of Louis-Ferdinand Céline. The quotation from one of

<sup>79</sup> Wolfgang Sofsky, *The Order of Terror: The Concentration Camp*, Trans. William Templer, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), p.267.

<sup>80</sup> Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, p.27.

<sup>81</sup> The discovery of these manuscripts is discussed in Mesnard & Kahan, *Giorgio Agamben*, pp.19-20.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid. p.23.

the pamphlets cannot carry with it the context of the page upon which it was originally printed. A similar problem exists with these scrolls rescued from the earth. To quote a part of one of these pieces of writing necessarily entails a parting from the writing itself. It requires the loss of the visible effects of the scroll's burial beneath ground, the loss of the evidence of this burial. The traces of the concealment of these manuscripts - the discolouration, the fading, the remaining indications of words that were once but are no longer - are as important as the accounts themselves. The condition of the writing is another form of giving an account. It is a kind of witnessing. And these are handwritten records. The hands that penned these words and then buried them were the same hands that carried the dead into the ovens. These were written by the hands of men who went into the gas chambers to retrieve the dead. They are in the hand of men who were then themselves killed. The curls, lines and pressures which *form* these writings - the marks of the individual behind the ink - are lost in the transcription into print.<sup>84</sup> It is also important to mention that Lewental, for example, wrote in Yiddish (something Agamben acknowledges) and that these characters, that constitute his scription - a scription which carries an account of the horror from out of someone working in the crematoria into the present - is written in a language that was then commonplace. Lewental was probably taught how to shape these letters as a child, taught to write in Yiddish. The printed words (in translation or not) against the pristine white of the page, the re-citing of these scrolls, leaves behind their history, the matter of the ink and the paper.

### The Remains of a Day in August

The scrolls that the members of the *Sonderkommando* buried in the earth (sometimes within a squashed piece of metal, sometimes without, using instead whatever else was to hand) were not the only testimonies left by these '*bearers of a horrendous*

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<sup>83</sup> 'Eaten away by humidity and hence partially illegible'. Georges Didi-Huberman, *Images Malgré Tout*, (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 2003), p.15 (n15).

<sup>84</sup> For example Zalmen Gradowski's handwriting might be described as angular. It often has sharply demarcated characters; at time his pen zigzags to produce the letters, the words. There is a certainty to the shape of this prose and also perhaps a sense of the rapidity of its execution. It *looks* like it was written quickly. Printed words do not demonstrate belief and have no velocity.



*secret*'.<sup>85</sup> There are also a series of four photographs taken by a Greek Jew called Alex (who worked in one of the squads) one day in August 1944 to provide evidence of the atrocities that were being committed at Auschwitz. The film from which these pictures were developed was smuggled out of Auschwitz hidden in a tube of toothpaste.<sup>86</sup> These photographs are discussed at length by the French art historian Georges Didi-Huberman in his ground-breaking work *Images malgré tout*. Two of the images depict members of the *Sonderkommando* at 'work,' a third shows a group of naked women on their way to the gas chamber, the final picture is almost abstract - tree tops and light - an exhaustion of content. Here is Didi-Huberman's description of the taking of the first two photographs (figs. 3-4):

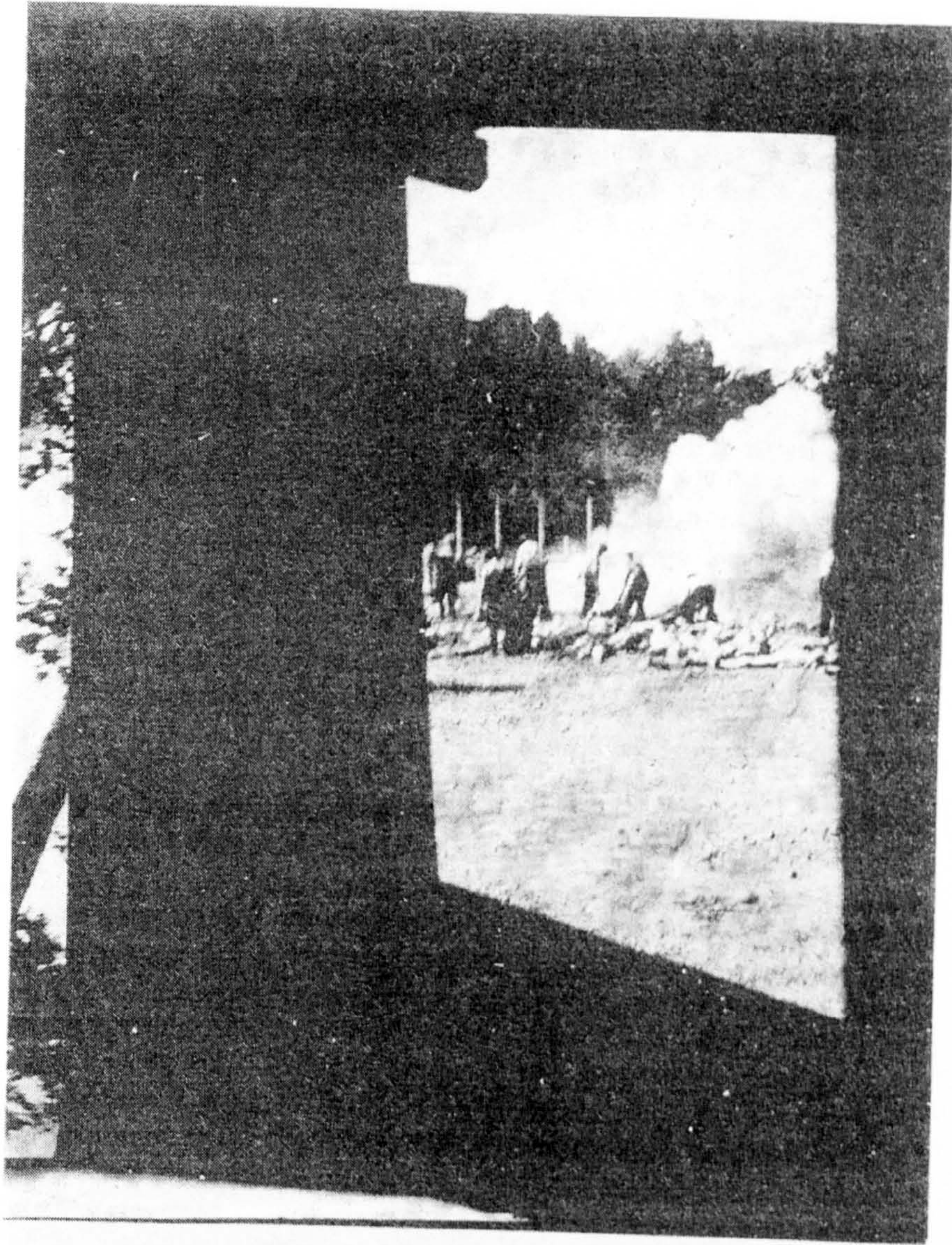
*Terrible paradoxe de cette chambre noire: pour réussir à extraire l'appareil du seau, à caler le viseur, à l'approcher de son visage et à prendre une première séquence d'images, le photographe a dû se cacher dans la chambre à gaz à peine – peut-être pas encore complètement – vidée de ses victimes. Il est en retrait dans l'espace sombre. Le biais, l'obscurité où il se tient le protègent. Il s'enhardit, change d'axe et s'avance: la seconde vue est un peu plus frontale et légèrement plus rapprochée. Plus risquée, donc. Mais aussi, paradoxalement, plus posée: plus nette. Comme si la peur avait un instant disparu devant la nécessité de ce travail, arracher une image. On y voit, justement, le travail quotidien des autres membres de l'équipe, celui d'arracher aux cadavres, qui gisent encore au sol, leur dernière semblance humaine. Les gestes des vivants disent la pesanteur des corps et la tâche à mener dans l'immédiateté des décisions à prendre: tirer, traîner, jeter. La fumée, derrière, est celle des fosses d'incinération: corps posés en quinconce sur 1,50 mètre de profondeur, crépitements de la graisse, odeurs, recroquevillements de la matière humaine, tout ce don't parle Filip Müller est là, sous cet écran de fumée que la photographie a fixé pour nous. Derrière est le bois de bouleaux. Le vent souffle au nord, peut-être au nord-ouest.<sup>87</sup>*

<sup>85</sup> Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, p.36.

<sup>86</sup> Didi-Huberman, *Images malgré tout*, p.23.

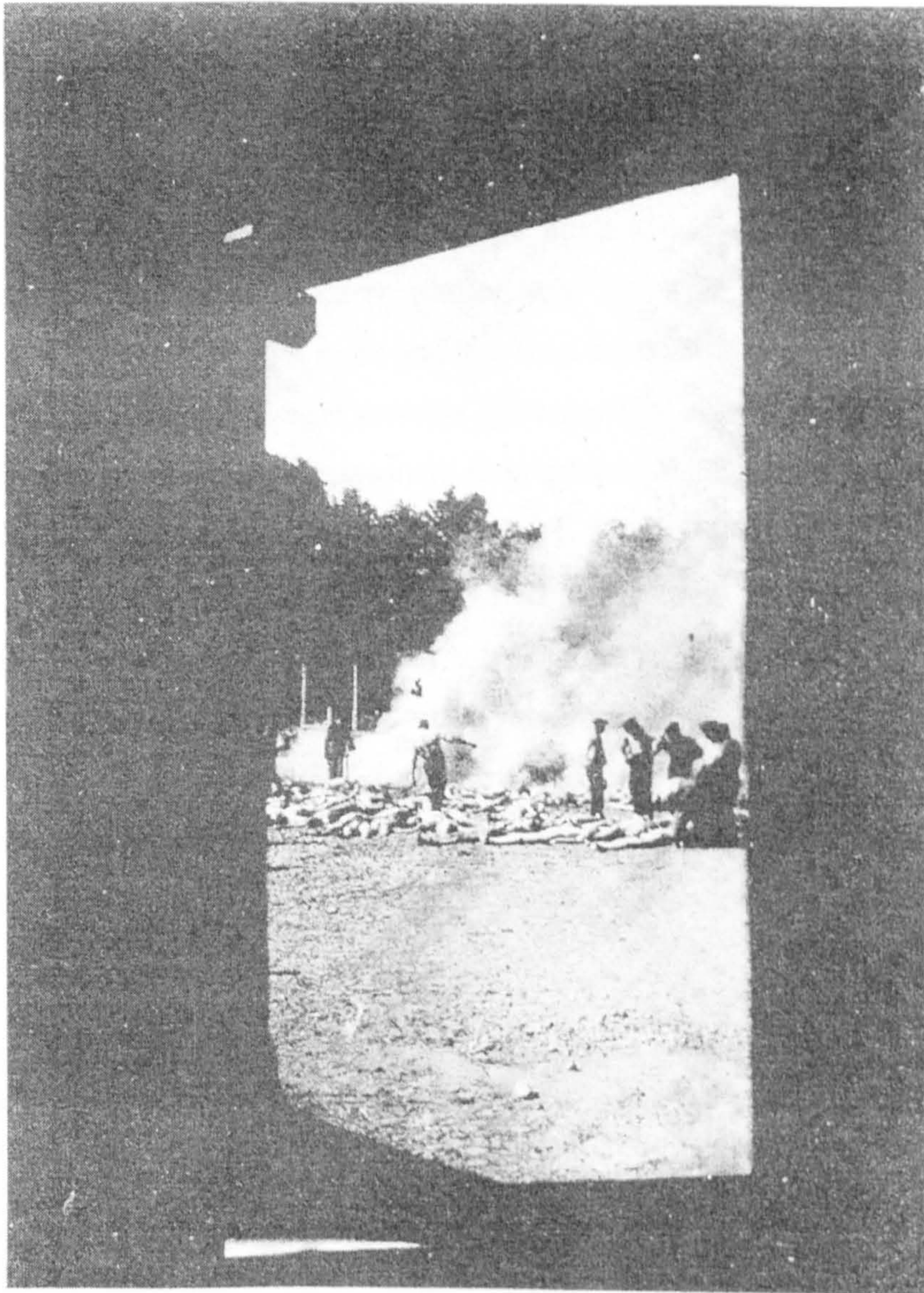
<sup>87</sup> 'The terrible paradox of this black chamber, in order to get the camera out of the bucket, to set the viewfinder, to bring it up close to his face and to take this first sequence of images, the photographer must have had to hide himself in the gas chamber which had just been – and then perhaps not completely – emptied of its victims. He sets himself back in this gloom. The angle, the darkness in which he keeps himself, protecting him. Growing emboldened, he shifts position and moves forward: the second view is a little more frontal and slightly closer. Riskier then. But also paradoxically more staged: cleaner. As if fear had briefly disappeared in the face of the importance of the task, to snatch a picture. One can see, in fact, the everyday work of the other members of the team, that of snatching from the bodies - which are still lying on the ground - their final human resemblance. The gestures of the living speak of the weight of the bodies and of the work to be done within the immediacy of the decisions to be taken: pull, drag, throw. The smoke behind is that of the pits used for burning the dead: bodies laid in staggered rows to a depth of one and a half metres, the cracklings of grease, the smells, the shrivelling of human flesh, all those things that Filip Müller speaks of, are here, in that veil of smoke that photography has made permanent for us. Behind is the





**Figure 3.** Anonymous (member of the *Sonderkommando* at Auschwitz), *Burning of corpses in a pit in front of the gas chamber at Crematorium 5 at Auschwitz, August 1944.* State Museum of Auschwitz-Birkenau. (Negative 277).





**Figure 4.** Anonymous (member of the *Sonderkommando* at Auschwitz), *Burning of corpses in a pit in front of the gas chamber at Crematorium 5 at Auschwitz, August 1944.* State Museum of Auschwitz-Birkenau. (Negative 278).



These photographs are taken from within the gas-chamber, a part of the chamber is visible; this is the blackness that surrounds the squad who are disposing of the dead bodies. Janina Struk writes that '*from a window a few photographs were taken of the burning pyres and women being sent to the gas-chamber*'.<sup>88</sup> This is incorrect. The black frame marks the entry way to the chamber, it is not a window but a door. This is made more evident in the second clearer photograph, the one which Struk chooses to reproduce. The blackness is both more and less than the outline of an entry and an exit. A tenebrous frame. '*Augen und Mund stehn so offen und leer, Herr*'.<sup>89</sup> This emptiness in the image is the gas-chamber. It is masonry, it is matter. Yet what it *is* cannot be seen. Opaque, obscure, almost nothing. Only colour - the non-colour of night - almost immaterial. Didi-Huberman describes how often, when they are reproduced, these two photographs are recentred. The black expanse is removed in a process of purifying '*la substance imageante de son poids non documentaire*'.<sup>90</sup> This action is reminiscent of Agamben's gesture in *Remnants of Auschwitz*; where he sheds the camps of all context that does not lend weight to his argument. The darkness is rejected because it is perceived to interfere with the integrity of the images. It shows us *nothing*. Didi-Huberman writes that this:

*'...masse noire qui entoure la vision des cadavres et des fosses, cette masse où rien n'est visible donne, en réalité, une marque visuelle aussi précieuse que tout le reste de la surface impressionnée. Cette masse où rien n'est visible, c'est l'espace de la chambre à gaz: la chambre obscure où il a fallu se retirer pour mettre en lumière le travail du Sonderkommando, dehors, au-dessus des fosses d'incinération. Cette masse noire nous donne donc la situation même, l'espace de possibilité la condition d'existence des photographies mêmes'*.<sup>91</sup>

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wood of silver birches. The wind is blowing to the north, perhaps to the north-west'. Didi-Huberman, *Images malgré tout*, p.22.

<sup>88</sup> Janina Struk, *Photographing the Holocaust: Interpretations of the Evidence*, (London: I.B. Tauris, 2004), p.113. Struk is wrong to state that all the photographs were taken from the same place. The photographs of the women running and of the tree tops were taken later at some distance from the gas chamber. See Didi-Huberman, *Images malgré tout*, p.23.

<sup>89</sup> 'Our eyes and our mouths are so open and empty, Lord' (Trans. Michael Hamburger). Paul Celan, 'Tenebrae,' in *Selected Poems*, (London: Penguin, 1996), pp.114-115.

<sup>90</sup> In a process of purifying 'the substance of the image of its non-documentary force'. Didi-Huberman, *Images malgré tout*, p.51.

<sup>91</sup> This '*black expanse* which surrounds the spectacle of the corpses and the pits, this expanse where *nothing is visible* gives, in reality, a *visual marker* as precious as all the rest of the exposure. The expanse where nothing can be seen is the space of the gas-chamber, the *dark chamber* where it was necessary to



The blackness provides the trace of the conditions of possibility that made the photographs possible, concealment within the gas-chamber. It is, of course, Didi-Huberman who brings to light this context, who exposes the violence that inheres in the reframing of the image. If there is a contextual ethics, however, then the returning of this darkness to the image would seem to be the ethical thing to do. This not just because, as Didi-Huberman rightly states, it returns to Alex the danger of his endeavour. To crop the image is to '*faire comme si Alex avait pu tranquillement prendre ses photos à l'air libre*'.<sup>92</sup> It is to make the photographs safe. These images were the end-result of a great amount of risk-taking. The returning of this darkness is also important for other reasons. The black frame is part of the noise of the photographs. These images are edged by horror, the blackness is the boundary that permits the photograph to be. To remove this ambiguous edge is to avoid confronting the origin of the horrors within the pictures. The dark surround troubles the viewer because it appears to be nothing, it resists signification. It is the '*weight of meaninglessness, about which there is nothing insignificant*'.<sup>93</sup> It is the *showing* of death, in some sense similar to the black border of Victorian letters of condolence. This darkness contains no expression of sympathy though; it marks '*the utmost of abjection*'.<sup>94</sup> Especially in the second photograph the corpses that lie upon the ground have too much shape. We are used to seeing piles of corpses. We are accustomed to such sights, we contour them with the violence of familiarity: 'It is a pile of dead people'. It is possible to grow used to these images of mass murder: '*The shock of photographed atrocities wears off with repeated viewings, just as the surprise and bemusement felt the first time one sees a pornographic movie wears off after one sees a few more*'.<sup>95</sup> The corpses are contaminated by a certain kind of context, that of

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retreat to to bring to light the work of the *Sonderkommando* outside, above the incineration pits. This black expanse gives us then the situation itself, it is the space of possibility that allows the photographs to exist'. Ibid. p.52.

<sup>92</sup> To 'make as if Alex was able to take his photographs without risk in the open air'. Ibid.

<sup>93</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, Trans. Leon S. Roudiez, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), p.2.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid. p.4.

<sup>95</sup> Susan Sontag, *On Photography*, (London: Penguin, 1979), p.20. In the later book *Regarding the Pain of Others*, Sontag argues however that there are some photographs the impact of which does not diminish, '*there are pictures whose power does not abate, in part because one cannot look at them often*'. She suggests that there are some images of facial disfigurement - such as those of the survivors of Hiroshima and Nagasaki - which we cannot become inured to. They will always cut the eye. Sontag, *Regarding the*

habituation. Atrocity photographs sear the eye, they cause pain but then - with repeated viewing - they also cauterize the very wound they have caused. The darkness however is plaintive. It does not shock the spectator but instead empties them. These pictures can be given the appearance of coherence - this is precisely what Didi-Huberman does, and what I also cannot help but do - they can be named, shaped, made into some thing, filled. Yet always a part of the darkness will resist this desire to contour it. It is rather that out of which contour arises, bordering all interpretations rather than being delimited by them. Shape momentarily disappears in this darkness.

### The Disappeared

There is honesty in the insubstantiality of the expanse of blackness; in its refusal to be representative. The corpses that are bordered by this blackness – whilst manifestly present as representation – are unrepresentable. As they exist in the photograph they are given too much substance. That which was reduced to ash (that which was rendered shapeless) continues to appear in the photograph as a something rather than the nothing that it would actually become. The bodies that continue to lie upon the ground in the photographs; were dragged to the pit and then burned soon after the pictures were taken. These bodies have vanished yet they remain. To remove the nothingness that borders them is to perpetuate the travesty of this kind of representation, the travesty of the illusion of shape where now there is none. Ricco writes that in *'the time of AIDS, a disappeared aesthetics may be the only way to ethically relate to the historicity and sociality of AIDS; to avoid sparing loss as has occurred in the history of symbolizing, narrativizing, and putting a face to AIDS'*.<sup>96</sup> We might similarly write about the necessity of a 'disappeared aesthetics' in the time of Auschwitz. The only way to find an adequate representation of loss is to lose representation, *'the problem is not simply the question of representational content, but the question of representation itself'*.<sup>97</sup> Images too often recuperate what they depict; they keep that which has disappeared in the realm of appearance. There is always

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*Pain of Others*, (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2003), p.74. For a review of this book see Nicholas Chare, 'Pain in camera,' *parallax* 34, (January-March 2005), pp.88-89.

<sup>96</sup> Ricco, *The Logic of the Lure*, p.40.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.* pp.40-41.



*something* where there should be *no thing*. The darkness in these photographs approaches the non-status of being *no thing*. A disappeared aesthetics is one in which it is not the visible or invisible that matters but the imperceptible. It is '*a refusal of either/or logics, a non-dialectical double refusal that is "no-longer-being" and "not-yet-being," at once*'.<sup>98</sup> It is the falling of difference back into sameness, the return of sounds to the noise. It is not disappearance as we usually conceive of it (the making absent of a presence) but the reappearance of the beneath of appearances. Ricco explains that '*a disappeared aesthetics disappears aesthetics, making it difficult to determine artifactuality, authorial presence, even form and content – those things that constitute aesthetic and art historical discourse*'.<sup>99</sup> In the case of these photographs the presence of the photographer (Alex, whose surname we will now never know, and of whom all that is left is his first name and these four photographs) and the content of the images are, of course, vital. So too, however, is the disappeared aesthetics which surrounds rather than supersedes them. This blackness is the nothing that is loss, it contains the non-quality of no longer being a thing. The blackness is and is not part of the photograph, it is the light-writing of darkness, the unwriting of light. It is an unphotographing within the photograph.

The shapeless frame of these images must never be sacrificed, but the shape is equally important. These images were acts of resistance taken by inmates at Auschwitz. They represent the unrepresentable. In *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Hannah Arendt wrote:

*It is of some importance to realize that all pictures of concentration camps are misleading insofar as they show the camps in their last stages, at the moment the Allied troops marched in. There were no death camps in Germany proper, and at that point all extermination equipment had already been dismantled. On the other hand, what provoked the outrage of the Allies most and what gives the films their special horror – namely the sight of human skeletons – was not at all typical of for the German concentration camps; extermination was handled systematically by gas, not by starvation.*<sup>100</sup>

Sontag reiterates Arendt's assertion about these pictures from the camps, writing that '*what makes the images unbearable – the piles of corpses, the skeletal survivors – was*

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<sup>98</sup> Ibid. p.41.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid. p.42.

<sup>100</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, (San Diego: Harcourt, 1994), p.446 (n138).



not at all typical for the camps, which, when they were functioning, exterminated their inmates systematically (by gas, not starvation and illness), and immediately cremated them'.<sup>101</sup> These photographs demonstrate that not all pictures of the camps are misleading; on the day in August when the Greek Jew Alex took these images the gas chamber was operational. These prints preserve a horrible narrative. Taken from the point where life ended, they display the after death, they show the bodies that are soon to become or have already become ash. The first blurred picture shows two members of the *Sonderkommando* pulling a corpse towards the burning pit, whilst another member is bending down, perhaps preparing to drag another body in the same direction.<sup>102</sup> This physical exertion tells a story. As does the taking of each picture which as well as showing these scenes of horror also testifies to the pressure of Alex's finger upon the button of the camera. He depressed the button to take the image. It attests to the life behind it as well as to the lives and deaths within it. The negative contains the trace of the picture taker as well as the picture taken. Narration is action, it is movement. Here an arrested act is visible. A body is being pulled from somewhere to somewhere. It is motionless yet in motion. In the second picture the men have disappeared. They are perhaps enveloped by the smoke. In that screen of smoke that rises up from the pits Didi-Huberman sees '*crépitements de la graisse, odeurs, recroquevillements de la matière humaine*'. He sees sounds, smells and physical degeneration. This synaesthetic quality to

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<sup>101</sup> Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, p.75. In her book *Memory Effects*, Dora Apel also states that photographs were '*nonexistent in the camps*'. Apel, *Memory Effects: The Holocaust and the Art of Secondary Witnessing*, (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2002), p.117.

<sup>102</sup> As Sofsky explains, pits as well as ovens were used for burning the dead at Auschwitz. Sofsky's horrific description of this process is instructive because it demonstrates the desire to destroy the bodies beyond all recognition, to void them of all substance: '*...the dead were also burned on gigantic pyres in Auschwitz in the summer of 1944. Behind bunker 2, prisoners working in alternate shifts had to dig deep ditches. A Kommando of twenty-five men piled the corpses in three layers on a large iron grating. Fifteen stokers laid sawed-up beams, wood shavings, and pieces of wood into the pits, ignited them with torches and rags drenched in oil, and then tended to the fire. They constantly jabbed with long iron pokers between the charred smoldering carcasses, and poured oil, methanol, or boiling human fat that had accumulated in the receptacles at the two ends of the pit into the flames. It took about five to six hours to turn the twelve hundred corpses in a pit into ashes. The water was directed from all sides onto the ashes and the remains of bones. As soon as the surface had cooled somewhat, wooden floorboards covered with black metal plate were tossed into the pits. The thirty-five men of the Aschenkommando now climbed down into the pit and shoveled out the glowing-hot ashes. The only flimsy protection the men had against the danger of being burned or blinded were flat caps and protective goggles. The remains were transported in wheelbarrows at double time to the ash-deposit site. The charred limbs and torsos were removed with special forks there, and burned a second time in a smaller pit. The remaining ash was pounded to a pulverized mass on a rectangular concrete surface*'. Sofsky, *The Order of Terror*, p.270.



the photographs makes them similar to Celan's poetry and Delbo's prose. The visual conjures up the acoustic, the olfactory and the tactile. The smoke is a kind of interference, of noise. This smoke-screen hides the pits and the dead within them. It gets in the way of witnessing. Yet perhaps this getting in the way is what is needed. This smoke is like the black frame in that it is not easily shaped. Insubstantial yet given substance by the paper upon which it is *preserved*, the smoke is fixed yet unfixable. The clouds of cinders prevent the photographs from becoming still. Geoffrey Hartman describes atrocity photographs as '*brutal, mechanically frozen images*,' that enact a shameless assault upon the spectator.<sup>103</sup> The smoke in these pictures taken by the *Sonderkommando* can be understood as a manifestation of shame, an involuntary veiling of atrocity. This evidence of burning matter is a kind of horrific modesty. It conceals the bodies that are being consumed by fire, whilst also revealing them. The smoke *moves*. It tells a story. It tells us that the bodies in front of the conflagration are destined to have a '*Grab in den Wolken*'.<sup>104</sup> The smoke is in motion, a motion made measurable by the motionless corpses (this especially in the second photograph).<sup>105</sup> The smoke makes the photograph dynamic and it makes it so through the matter that matters, the matter of its immateriality.

## Ash

Ash is the body made almost imperceptible. It is the horror of the body unshaped; the horror of the murder not just of the individual but of their unique contour. The ash is the beyond of the *Muselmann*. If the ultimate aim of biopower was to sever all connection between the human and the inhuman; then it had set itself an impossible aim.<sup>106</sup> A broken connection requires a connection; the break preserves this connectivity in order to be. A broken glass requires the trace of the unbroken glass in order to break. The human is the necessary condition of the inhuman. Ash, however, is beyond the human and the

<sup>103</sup> Geoffrey Hartman, 'The Struggle Against the Inauthentic: An Interview by Nicholas Chare,' in *parallax* 30 10:1 (January-March 2004), p.77.

<sup>104</sup> A 'grave... in the clouds' (Trans. Michael Hamburger). Paul Celan, 'Todesfugue,' in *Selected Poems*, pp.62-65.

<sup>105</sup> The corpses act as a gauge against which to measure change in a similar way to the way the mouth does in Bacon's *Study after Velázquez*.

inhuman, it is beyond *bios* or *zoē*. The ultimate aim of National Socialism (as opposed to biopower) was not to divide the human and the inhuman but to do away with division, to *destroy*. To turn our back on the gas chambers as Agamben implicitly invites us to do, is to deny this odious objective. Raul Hilberg's monumental study of the Shoah, *The Destruction of the European Jews*, is so named because *destruction* is precisely what the Nazi's set out to achieve.<sup>107</sup> The *Muselmänner* were ash in the making. Ash was the consummation of the Nazi project. The leading sense of the word 'destroy' is 'to undo, break up, reduce into a useless form, consume, or dissolve'.<sup>108</sup> Ash is the body undone, the body unbodied. It is the dissolution of shape.

We all have our own contours, we are all distinct, and this '*difference is absolute because each human being is different from all those who have lived, who live, and who will live*'.<sup>109</sup> Even the dead have their differences, something which both archaeology and forensic science often reveal. Ash is indifferent. It is beyond alterity. The individual exists in relation to the other. We shape each other. As Adriana Cavarero explains, we exist through our exposure to others; '*the who is simply exposed; or better, finds herself always already exposed to another, and consists in this reciprocal exposition*'.<sup>110</sup> The self and other engage in a mutual shaping, a mutual developing. The other does not even have to be alive for us to be exposed to their otherness, for us to be shaped by them. The other does however have to be *recognisable*, have to be *shapeable*.<sup>111</sup> Ash approaches the unrecognisable, approaches nothingness. It must be prevented from attaining the non-state of nihility. The ash must be attested to. These photographs taken by the *Sonderkommando* bear witness to the ash. It is important that the photographs were taken by them. These are not photographs intended to celebrate destruction. These are photographs that attempt to prevent it. That we know who took these pictures - the

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<sup>106</sup> As quoted previously; '*biopower's supreme ambition is to produce, in a human body, the absolute separation of the living being and the speaking being, zoē and bios, the inhuman and the human – survival*'. Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz*, p.156.

<sup>107</sup> Raul Hilberg, *The Destruction of the European Jews*, (Chicago: 1961).

<sup>108</sup> *The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*, Ed. C.T. Onions. (Oxford: Oxford university Press, 1973), p.531.

<sup>109</sup> Adriana Cavarero, *Relating Narratives: Storytelling and selfhood*, Trans. Paul A. Kottman, (London: Routledge, 2000), p.89.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid.

<sup>111</sup> The M(Other) is shaped into some *thing*, into something recognisable, through a process of abjection. That which is abject has shape even as it threatens all shaping.



context of their taking - is of vital importance. There is an ethics to all context, to all shaping.

### This Way for the Gas Chambers

Lyotard writes of the Holocaust denier that *'his argument is: in order for a place to be identified as a gas chamber, the only eyewitness I will accept would be a victim of this gas chamber; now, according to my opponent, there is no victim that is not dead; otherwise, this gas chamber would not be what he or she claims it to be. There is, therefore, no gas chamber'*.<sup>112</sup> The gas chamber must be seen to be believed. The dead are required to speak of what they have seen, to say their own death. It is not enough for the living to say that the dead died. It is not enough to have witnessed the inside of the gas chambers. At one point Filip Müller resolved to die with a group of his countrymen and hid himself inside the gas chamber: *'The atmosphere in the dimly lit gas chamber was tense and depressing. Death had come menacingly close. It was only minutes away. No memory, no trace of any of us would remain'*.<sup>113</sup> He was persuaded to leave by some of the other prisoners before the chamber was sealed. Müller's book is called *Three Years in the Gas Chambers*. He is often *in* the chambers; his *is* a story from the inside of death. More than once he describes the entry of groups into the gas chambers and their eventual exit, the story of their journey from life to death. His does not die however, he does not write back from the dead. For the denier Müller's testimony is not enough.

The denier seeks the undeniable testimony of the dead. A photograph of a gassing in process – of the dying and the dead – would seem to provide the kind of witnessing Lyotard's denier professes to need.<sup>114</sup> Didi-Huberman suggests that claims that there was insufficient light to take pictures in the gas chambers are false.<sup>115</sup> Müller writes however of *'the subterranean labyrinth into which the gas chamber...turned when the lights went*

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<sup>112</sup> Lyotard, *The Differend*, pp.3-4.

<sup>113</sup> Filip Müller, *Eyewitness Auschwitz: Three Years in the Gas Chambers*, Trans. Susan Flatauer, (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1999), p.113.

<sup>114</sup> Although, of course, the denier will often not be denied. No matter what photographs do exist the denier can always claim that they are simulated.

<sup>115</sup> Didi-Huberman, *Images malgré tout*, p.78 (n26).

out'.<sup>116</sup> This suggests that people died in the dark. A photograph taken through the peephole which enabled someone to look into the chamber whilst it was in operation – or a photograph taken from within the chamber itself – would be black.<sup>117</sup> It would show nothing. The two photographs taken by Alex from within the gas chamber are edged by this nothing but also *show us* death; and beyond this death, the ashes. The eyewitnesses – the victims of the gas chamber – speak. The impossible testimony is made possible. Roland Barthes writes of shock photos – reiterating the remark of Geneviève Serreau – that '*it is not enough for the photographer to signify the horrible for us to experience it*'.<sup>118</sup> He complains that in these kind of pictures the photographer '*has almost always overconstructed the horror he is proposing, adding to the fact by contrasts or parallels, the intentional language of horror*'.<sup>119</sup> Yet particularly in the first out of focus image there is no manifestation of this intention that would mediate the horror. The blurring is not the result of artifice. It is accidental testimony to the fragility of life in the camps. The photographer risks death by taking the picture. He is afraid; his hands may be trembling, he is too hurried. The result is a haze that will forever refuse resolution. Kristeva describes semiotic activity as introducing a '*wandering or fuzziness into language*'.<sup>120</sup> The blurring in the photograph disrupts its capacity for communication - its symbolic aspect – and frees up the semiotic. Here the horror is both signified and shown, the something and the nothing, the shape and the shapeless co-existing. The noise – the blackness and the blurring – are the dead once they are beyond shaped death. The blackness and the blurring constitute a semiotic force within the images. They manifest the power of horror...the horror of an end to contour...the power of the unbounded. The dead speak out of this obscurity.

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<sup>116</sup> Müller, *Eyewitness Auschwitz*, p.117.

<sup>117</sup> Müller mentions the existence of this peephole on p.116 of *Eyewitness Auschwitz*.

<sup>118</sup> Roland Barthes, 'Shock-Photos,' in Barthes, *The Eiffel Tower and Other Mythologies*, Trans. Richard Howard, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), p.71.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid.

<sup>120</sup> Julia Kristeva, 'From One Identity to Another,' in *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Art and Literature*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), p.136.



## The Photograph of Nothing

Once he had left the 'security' of the gas chamber, Alex walked towards the rows of birch trees. It is here that he came across the women who were being led or about to be led to the crematorium. It is now that he takes '*deux clichés à la sauvette, sans regarder, peut-être en continuant de marcher*'.<sup>121</sup> The first image is fuzzy and at an odd angle but a group of women can be seen in the bottom right hand corner (fig. 5).<sup>122</sup> The second, '*est pratiquement abstraite: on subodore juste le cime des bouleaux*' (fig. 6).<sup>123</sup> The sun is in the photographer's eyes: '*l'image est éblouie par le soleil qui perce à travers les ramures*'.<sup>124</sup> This photograph is difficult to describe. It is *not* anything. The 'suspicion' of treetops that Didi-Huberman perceives is seeable, especially when this picture is looked at in relation to the previous image (without this first picture to act as a guide it would be less easy for Didi-Huberman to make the kinds of observations he does). The picture is reproduced infrequently. What does it bear witness to? It is a picture of nothing. In *Images malgré tout*, Didi-Huberman suggests that the photograph attests to a great deal:

*Lorsqu'on dit de la dernière photographie qu'elle est simplement <sans utilité> - historique, s'entend -, on oublie tout ce dont, phénoménologiquement, elle témoigne chez le photographe: l'impossibilité de viser, le risque encouru, l'urgence, la course peut-être, la maladresse, l'éblouissement par le soleil en face, l'essoufflement peut-être. Cette image est, formellement, à bout de souffle: pure <énonciation>, pur geste, pur acte photographique sans visée (donc sans orientation, sans haut ni bas), elle nous donne accès à la condition d'urgence*

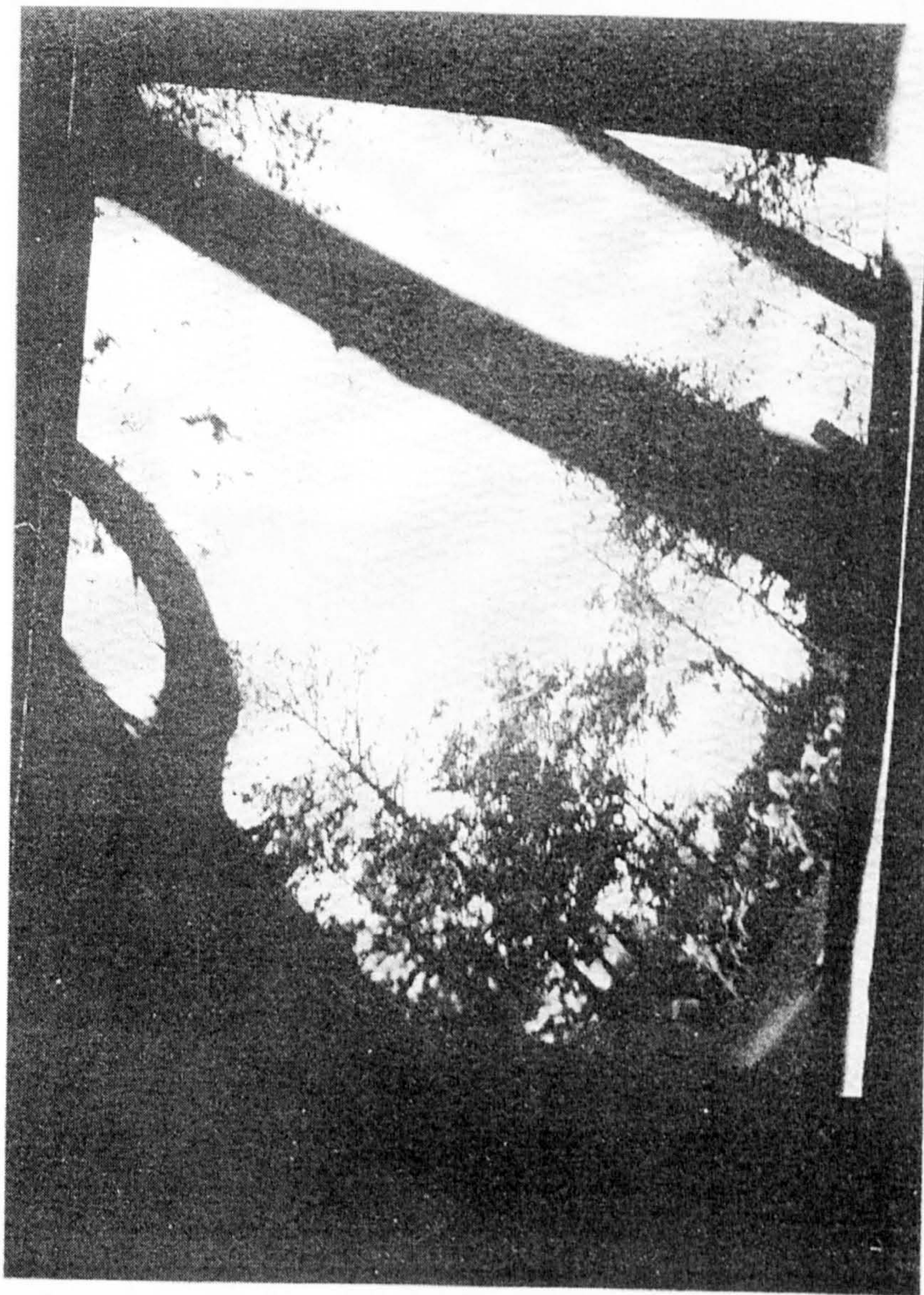
<sup>121</sup> He takes 'two exposures, hurriedly, without looking, perhaps whilst still walking'. Didi-Huberman, *Images malgré tout*, p.23.

<sup>122</sup> This picture has also suffered in reproduction from the violence of retouching. In one instance, '*la première photographie de la séquence extérieure a subi toute une série d'opérations: le coin inférieur droit a été agrandi; puis orthogonalisé, de façon à restituer des conditions plus normales à une prise de vue qui n'en bénéficiait pas; puis recadré, isolé (tout le reste de l'image devenant rebut). Pire, les corps et les visages des deux femmes au premier plan ont été retouchés, un visage inventé, même les seins remontés*'. 'From the sequence taken outside, the first photograph has undergone a whole series of processes: the lower right hand corner has been enlarged; then made rectangular, in such a way as to recreate more familiar conditions from a point of view which did not benefit from this; then recentred and isolated (all the rest of the picture becoming superfluous). Worse, the bodies and the faces of the two women in the foreground have been retouched, a face invented, even the breasts put back'. Ibid. p.50.

<sup>123</sup> The second 'is practically abstract: there is just a suspicion of the tops of the silver birches'. Ibid. p.23.

<sup>124</sup> 'The image is eclipsed by the sun which bursts through the foliage'. Ibid.





**Figure 5.** Anonymous (member of the *Sonderkommando* at Auschwitz), *Women on their way to the gas chamber at Crematorium 5, Auschwitz, August 1944.* State Museum of Auschwitz-Birkenau. (Negative 282).





**Figure 6.** Anonymous (member of the *Sonderkommando* at Auschwitz), *Women on their way to the gas chamber at Crematorium 5, Auschwitz, August 1944.* State Museum of Auschwitz-Birkenau. (Negative 283).



*dans laquelle furent arrachées quatre lambeaux `à l'enfer d'Auschwitz. Or, cette urgence aussi fait partie de l'histoire'.<sup>125</sup>*

The photograph does not show these things, a person breathing heavily, blinded by the sun, afraid yet overcome with the urgency of the task in hand; with the need to bear witness. It is Didi-Huberman who brings this context to the image - the photograph is exposed by his words, he develops it - and he is right to do so. He does not, however, look at the photograph itself; beyond saying that he perceives the hint of treetops. This is because there is very little to see. The image is predominantly black. The top left of the picture contains most of the light. Towards the middle left there is a thin 'thorn' of darkness jutting out into the patch of white. Towards the centre of the upper half of the image there is the most detail, what must be boughs and branches are visible. Didi-Huberman uses few words to give an account of the image itself because it resists wording. It refuses shape. Roland Barthes describes the experience of looking at some photographs in terms of a wounding, he writes:

*A Latin word exists to designate this wound, this prick, this mark made by a pointed instrument: the word suits me all the better in that it also refers to the notion of punctuation, and because the photographs I am speaking of are in effect punctuated, sometimes even speckled with these sensitive points; precisely these wounds are so many points.<sup>126</sup>*

The Latin word Barthes is referring to is *punctum*. In *Camera Lucida* Barthes differentiates between the *studium* - that which is of general interest in a photograph - and the *punctum* - which is a second element (not always present) that punctuates the *studium*. It fills the spectator with sensation. Barthes's *punctum* should be understood as a site of resistance. He suggests that we do not seek out the *punctum*, we do not understand it, rather it seeks us out, it understands us.<sup>127</sup> The *punctum* is not part of the meanings that we give to an image, rather it gives us meaning. Through the injury it causes, I feel

<sup>125</sup> 'When we say of the final photograph that is simply 'without use' - historically, of course - we forget everything that the photograph attests to phenomenologically: the impossibility of aiming, the risk that was taken, the urgency, maybe the walk, the awkwardness, the dazzling by the sun in front, the breathlessness perhaps. Formally, this picture is out of breath: pure enunciation, pure gesture, pure photographic act without aim (without direction, without top or bottom), it allows us access to the conditions of urgency within which these four fragments were snatched from the hell of Auschwitz. Because this urgency also forms a part of history'. Ibid. p.54.

<sup>126</sup> Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, Trans. Richard Howard, (London: Vintage, 1993), pp.26-27.

<sup>127</sup> Ibid. p.26.



something and I must ask why have I felt and what have I felt. As punctuation it has an asemantic element to it, an aspect...a point that resists the formation of meaning which constitutes the process of reading.<sup>128</sup> It eludes, evades, escapes our efforts to ensnare it and catch it in meaning. It gives sense without being sensible. The *punctum* is a stop, *punctum*'s are ellipses '...'. They are holes in the image. When reading and writing an image, when travelling across it, those details and destinations... black... white... treetops... sunlight... become less important than that which exists between them, which remains unsaid and in a sense therefore invisible. In any picture there is a between, a space that always opens between the words and what is in the picture. There is a remnant which is beyond writing. The *punctum* is the detail which stands out...it acts as a sting of responsibility... as a part of the picture that must be seen to and needs to be looked at, which demands a writing.

The final photograph taken by Alex would seem to have no detail that wounds the eye. In some images though the *punctum* is 'a kind of subtle beyond'.<sup>129</sup> The *punctum* is not in the image but is pointed towards by it. For Barthes this kind of *punctum* occurs around the erotic image as distinct from the pornographic. The erotic photograph has a blind field. It does not reveal everything. The pornographic photograph, on the other hand, does not need to be sought. It is *all* there. The horrific photograph might also be thought to have a blind field. The picture that attests to Auschwitz must do so as much by what it fails to show as what it does. In this final photograph the spectator is directed towards the *punctum* by the black milk, by the grey zone that is this shapeless non-representation. Gerhard Richter writes of grey that:

*It has the capacity that no other colour has, to make 'nothing' visible. To me, grey is the welcome and only possible equivalent for indifference, non-commitment, absence of opinion, absence of shape. But grey, like formlessness and the rest, can be real only as an idea, and so all I can do is create a colour nuance that means grey but is not it.*<sup>130</sup>

<sup>128</sup> On the subject of the asemantic aspect of punctuation see Giorgio Agamben's essay *Absolute Immanence* in Agamben, *Potentialities: Collected Essays in Philosophy*, Trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), pp.220-239. and in particular p.223.

<sup>129</sup> Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, p.59.

<sup>130</sup> Quoted in Herman Rapaport, 'Gerhard Richter and the Death of Poignancy,' in *parallax* 32 10:3 (July-September 2004), pp.104-105.

Grey is the impossible colour. It is the colour beneath all colours. It is that out of which shape emerges. The horror is this boundlessness that the photograph gestures towards. The *Sonderkommando* were placed out of bounds. They existed as noise. On the other side of abjection. This is something that Levi recognized, he realized the need to give shape to the members of the special squad, to bear witness. The grey zone is nothing. It is not a remnant. It is beyond good or bad, death or life, beyond the couplings that shape our world and make sense of it. The final photograph taken by Alex shows the dissolution of shape. It shows no thing. The non-object in the noise, '*elusive, fleeting, and baffling as it is...can be grasped only as a sign*'.<sup>131</sup> Kristeva writes that '*it is through the intermediary of a representation, hence a seeing, that it holds together*'.<sup>132</sup> The no thing can be known only through some thing. This photograph is the thing. It is abject. It is the matter of horror. In this opening to the nothing that lies beneath meaning, the photograph may be understood as providing a visual correlative to the writings of Celan and Delbo. The photograph is a representation that does not represent. It allows us to see the horror rather than its depiction. It *shows* nothing.

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<sup>131</sup> Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, p.46.

<sup>132</sup> Ibid.



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